

By Your Side is Where I Belong

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Zoro unwittingly becomes an older brother, what the heck is he doing with these kids, Naruto and Gaara are both happy, Luffy is overjoyed about his crew, People are a bit stronger, this is an AU/UA, Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, extended crew, Naruto and Gaara become Pirates, Zoro gets lost, Naruto has a family, Kurama and Shukaku didn't ask for this, Various Kiri Shinobi show up for awhile, Kiri will never be the same after this, Certain people have kekkei genkai, No one really knows if Sanji and Pudding are in a relationship, Sanji and Pudding like to flirt with each other and everyone else, Found Family, Konohagakure is a different place, Hatake Kakashi is a Troll, The Plot Thickens, There are mysteries surrounding the Bijū

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by [TexasBean](#)

Summary

All he was supposed to do in Konoha was collect the reward for the bounty and be on his way. But when Zoro defends some kid from a drunk during a festival, he didn't realize he'd get stuck with Naruto. Arriving in Suna, the pair meet Gaara, who ends up leaving with them when he sadly has no reason to stay. Luffy is overjoyed to get three nakama at the start of his journey...

The world is much bigger than people realize, and the Straw-Hat Pirates find themselves wrapped up in the mysteries of the Biju, Ancient Weapons, and earning the ire of the World Government while they're at it.

The unwitting presence of one resulting in the absence of others has far-reaching consequences.

Notes

Zoro arrives in Konoha during the Fire Festival, celebrating the defeat of the Nine Tails. When Zoro sees a guy picking on a kid, he thinks nothing of rescuing the kid and ends up throwing everything off course, and people aren't happy about it.

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

The Journey of a Thousand Miles Begins with Getting Lost

The Hidden Leaf village was aptly (and annoyingly) named in Zoro's opinion, considering the trouble he was going through to find it. After hours of walking, Zoro finally came upon the entrance. He nodded to the pair of sentries standing guard at the gate.

The two Leaf Ninja sized the sixteen-year-old up; glancing curiously at the teen's green hair and noting the disheveled look about his clothes. One glanced down at Zoro's swords, while the other stepped out to meet him.

"State your business, kid."

The Ninja had a no-nonsense tone, and by the way he had a hand hovering over his weapons pouch, he clearly was prepared for a fight should Zoro be stupid enough to try anything.

Zoro held up his hands in a placating manner, and keeping his expression in a mix of boredom and annoyance, he said, "The name's Roronoa Zoro. I have a delivery from the Bingo Book for the Third Hokage. I'm getting my ID, now."

Zoro retrieved said ID while being well-aware that the Leaf Ninja were watching his every move. If they saw so much as a toothpick, Zoro was sure he'd hit the ground before he could even draw a sword. A part of him was sorely tempted to test his speed, but even though it was rare, Zoro *did* have his moments of common sense.

As the Leaf Ninja studied his ID, Zoro considered making some annoying conversation just to annoy the Leaf bastards, but alas, he didn't get his chance.

The first man put a finger to his ear and spoke into a personal radio, "We need an escort for some bounty hunter calling himself Roronoa Zoro to the Hokage Tower."

'Some bounty hunter' was probably a lame attempt at an insult, but Zoro couldn't have cared less. The man looked as if he was about to add something else, but was cut off when a Ninja appeared in a swirl of leaves. He wore armor and a dog mask, but what stood out was his gravity-defying silvery-white hair.

"Keep an eye on him," the first Ninja instructed, eyeing Zoro with suspicion.

"Of course," Dog said in an amused-yet-lazy tone. Turning to Zoro, he extended an arm towards the village. "This way, sir."

Zoro scowled at Dog's slight sarcasm, and followed after the masked Ninja.

Dog smiled at Zoro from under his mask as he grabbed Zoro's arm and guided him towards the Hokage tower. "Mah, Zoro-kun, it's been awhile. You look well."

"As well as I could be," Zoro snorted, "Dog."

"Oi, oi, don't be like that, Zoro-kun!" Dog waved his hand in joking admonishment. "I happen to like dogs."

"Sure, Flea-Bag. At least the name fits."

While Zoro may have made fun of the Shinobi for naming themselves after animals, he personally thought it was pretty cool – not that he'd *ever* say something like that out loud! But if he were to be called after an animal, it'd probably be a shark or a tiger...Tiger-Shark? As Zoro silently contemplated his animal name, he took in the scenery. The hubbub around the pair consisted of the villagers preparing for that evening's festivities.

"Zoro-kun," Dog spoke up, and Zoro glanced at him. "How do you like dango? There's a place on the east end of the village. They also have really good sake. Their specials tonight are going to be really good."

"Alright," Zoro shrugged casually. While dango wasn't necessarily his favorite, it was the mention of sake that convinced him.

They walked in companionable silence, and reached the Hokage tower in a little under half an hour.

Sarutobi Hiruzen hadn't really changed all that much since Zoro had last seen him a year ago; he was still old.

"Hello, Hokage-sama," Dog greeted in a respectful yet casual manner.

"Good morning, Dog." Hiruzen's gaze fell onto the other teen. "It's been awhile, Roronoa-san. Doing well, I hope?"

"As good as I could be, old man." Zoro said with a smirk. "You look

like you haven't aged a day pass 50."

A young secretary stood off to the side, giving Zoro wary and disapproving glances. She didn't like how casual the teen was being with the Third, but since her boss didn't seem to mind, she kept silent.

"Heh, you flatter me." Hiruzen then got down to business. "So who have you brought us today?"

"Kirito Hakoda," Zoro replied, pulling out a Sealing Scroll from his travel bag. Zoro pushed a bit of chakra into the scroll, and a man's nearly bisected corpse appeared on the floor of the Third's office.

"He was something of a disappointment," Zoro slightly complained of the former missing-Nin, ignoring the secretary's look of horror and disgust as blood leaked out onto the floor. "I thought he'd be more of a challenge. His sword skills didn't push me as far as I'd hoped they would."

Zoro resealed the body and placed the scroll on the Hokage's desk while his secretary quickly left to retrieve Zoro's reward money. She came back a few minutes later with enough ryo that Zoro was sure it would last him nearly seven months – if he stretched it. And stayed within the Elemental Nations. Ryo didn't have any real value anywhere else in East Blue or the Grand Line.

"Thanks for your time, old man." Zoro said, stuffing the money into a pocket of his shirt that was hidden thanks to his haramaki.

"Will you be staying long enough to enjoy the Fire Festival?" Hiruzen asked.

"Yeah, I'll probably stay for a few days." Zoro's casual shrug was accompanied by a yawn. "Or maybe I'll leave tomorrow. Who knows?"

"I can escort Roronoa-san to an inn," Dog volunteered.

"Yes, thank you, Dog." Hiruzen smiled. "I hope the rest of your stay with us is pleasant, Roronoa-san. Please enjoy our festival."

Zoro simply waved, and did his best to hide his annoyance as Dog held his arm to prevent him from getting "lost". It wasn't *his* fault that the stupid Ninja kept moving the paths and buildings around, dammit!

Dog led Zoro to a cozy-looking inn with *Seiko* written on a simple wooden sign hanging off of a bar near the roof. Fortunately, the place

still had a few rooms available, in spite of nearly every other place being fully booked. Since the village was in the midst of celebrating a festival, traveling merchants more often than not overran Konoha for a few days before moving on. It also helped that Seiko Inn was mostly used predominantly by Ninja.

Stating the obvious, Dog said, "Well, here's Seiko Inn. Their prices are really good and they have a hot bath."

"Hmm, thanks." Zoro nodded. "Where can I get some sake?"

"There are places around; depends on what you want." Dog shrugged, not really caring how early or late a person wanted to start drinking. "Mah, I have to go now." Zoro glared as he could hear the smile in Dog's voice as he added, "Try not to get lost, Marimo-san."

Zoro's face flushed, much to Dog's amusement. Ignoring the sudden nickname Dog had for him, Zoro indignantly shouted, "I *don't* get lost!"

A few villagers gave Zoro an odd look as he was essentially shouting at air, but they quickly went back to their business when Zoro glared at them.

He entered the inn and was able to get a room and was even able to find it easily enough. Room 2-3 was cozy, just like the outside. Zoro found it odd that he could actually describe anything as being 'cozy'.

Zoro's few possessions remained with him, as he didn't trust leaving his things unsupervised. He made his way (somewhat) easily to the bathhouse behind the inn. Afterwards, Zoro found himself a new outfit. For obvious reasons, the areas where Ninja shopped and the areas where civilians shopped were separated into various sections. Zoro ended up at a Ninja shop, because he knew he would need to buy supplies to maintain his swords. He bought a light-armored gray shirt and dark green pants that also offered some protection and even had pockets for other supplies. The shirt was a little too big for him and he would have to cuff the pants, but he needed clothes that would last him a while. There was no point in buying clothes that he was going to outgrow anyway. He had a thing for bandannas, so a dark green one was added to his list of necessities. He changed into his new clothes in the changing room, and dumped the stuff he no longer needed into a nearby trashcan.

Zoro also bought a few scrolls and ink, along with various other supplies he was sure he would be needing. As he explored the village, he overheard the occasional whisper of a 'demon' and 'fox-child' that

the locals seemed to be very fearful of. Perhaps they were having trouble with an infestation or something, but that didn't really explain away why they spoke in hushed whispers, or why they quickly glanced around out of the corners of their eyes before talking. It got Zoro to thinking, but it wasn't exactly something he focused on.

Zoro stopped at a weapons shop to see if they had any decent swords other than the ones he had filched off of his opponents. Unfortunately, none of the swords there really 'spoke' to him. The shopkeeper noticed that Zoro had been perusing near the swords, yet hadn't moved to pick one up or bothered to look at anything else. Hoping to make a sale, the shopkeeper spoke up.

"Looking for something in particular? I can probably order it or even have it custom-made."

Zoro glanced over at the shopkeeper. "How long would either of those things take?"

"Depending on what you order, it could take a month or so. Custom work usually takes a month and half, maybe two at the most."

"Hm," Zoro grunted. "Unfortunately, I can't stick around here that long. I'm looking for someone, so my time isn't exactly free to dawdle around as I please."

Zoro turned to leave, but paused. He turned and faced the obviously disappointed shopkeeper. "You wouldn't happen to have an infestation of demons around here, would you?"

There was something strange in the shopkeeper's expression, and his posture was suddenly stiff. He clearly tried to act like everything was normal, but was doing a very poor job of it. "N-no, w-why do you ask?"

"Just curious," Zoro shrugged, but he had a grin on his face that made the shopkeeper almost think that a demon was currently in his store. "I like seeking out a challenge; and I thought I heard something about fox demons being nearby. The last guy I fought was a bit of a disappointment."

"No!" the shopkeeper was unnecessarily loud as the color drained from his face. "Nothing like that here! Nope, not-at-all!"

"Whatever you say." Zoro replied with a frown.

He left to find a place where he could find some decent sake.

The response was odd, Zoro thought. If they in fact had some sort of infestation, wouldn't the Ninja be able to take care of it? Wouldn't the shopkeeper have mentioned the fact that the village had Ninja at its disposal, and a wandering, bounty hunter-swordsman needn't bother?

Zoro silently cursed as he came upon the same dead-end a fourth time.

He decided to stop by the convenient store for a bit of food. The stores in Konoha were actually pretty nice, and the food they offered was cheap but high enough in quality. Zoro came upon an odd scene when he neared the convenient store.

The clerk was tossing a small blond boy out of the store by his ear.
"Get out, you brat!"

"But I didn' even do an'thin'!" the boy shouted indignantly.

"Don't think I don't know what you're up to, you brat!" the clerk yelled. "And stay out!"

The boy glared as the automatic door closed. He grabbed a rock from the ground and seemed to consider throwing it, but instead he let it drop back to the ground. The kid then dejectedly slouched over to a nearby bench and sat down with a huff.

Even from where he stood, Zoro heard the kid's stomach growl. The boy placed a hand on his stomach. Even though the kid was trying to put on a brave face, Zoro was sure that the kid was crying. He noticed a few wrinkled bills in the kid's other fisted hand.

Zoro had to walk passed the kid to enter the store, and upon entering Zoro didn't miss the glare that the clerk was giving him – or at least the glare was probably supposed to be directed towards the kid outside on the bench. The man suddenly smiled and said, "Welcome! Please look around and let me know if you need anything!"

Straight and to the point, Zoro asked, "Why'd you toss that kid out?"

The clerk balked. "He's a little thief! He was coming in here to steal."

"He had money."

"He must have stolen that too!"

The clerk looked *really* uncomfortable with the conversation.

"Whatever."

Zoro grabbed a few sandwiches, onigiri, some instant ramen, a few bottles of water and a can of beer.

Since Zoro didn't seem the type to even want to engage in any kind of conversation, the clerk silently rang his order up. Zoro paid and loaded up his groceries.

"Have a good day!" the clerk called after Zoro's retreating back. He was silently thankful that the green-haired teen was leaving. The kid had a downright scary glare that appeared to be his normal expression.

Zoro walked up to the bench and was easily ignored by the boy who had busied himself with glaring at his ratty shoes. Wordlessly, Zoro set one of the grocery bags down on the bench next to the kid and left.

Naruto looked understandably shocked. He didn't recognize the teen, and he was sure he would remember if one of the villagers had green hair and three swords. Naruto cautiously opened the bag, and was surprised to find bottles of water, onigiri and few bowls of instant ramen.

' He was nice to me... '

*o*o*o*

By now, the festivities had begun, and the streets were filled with people. Lanterns lit up the larger streets, vendors were calling out to customers, the smell of food permeated the air, and people were dressed in kimono and yukata. Fireworks were going off in different areas every few minutes, but Zoro didn't mind. He was currently in a state of bliss with some local sake. It wasn't overly sweet and had a bitter but pleasant aftertaste. Zoro quietly chuckled to himself. If he hadn't decided to become a swordsman, he probably could have become a wine critic.

Another teen which looked to be a year or two older than him with an over-sized shoulder bag and pants with too many pockets approached Zoro. The other teen wore dark sunglasses and carried a colorful book with two girls on it and had an expression on his face that showed he enjoyed what he was reading and didn't care who else knew it. The bag had a patch lazily sewn onto it that had the kanji *Books and Scrolls for sale* messily printed on it.

"Well, Marimo-san, you look happy."

"Finally found some decent sake." Zoro replied as he took another swig. He eyed the colorful book with some repulsion. Considering the fact it had an age restriction on the back cover gave Zoro the suspicion that it was smut. "You look happy yourself, Flea-Bag."

"Oh, you have me mistaken for someone else, Marimo-san; I'm a simple traveler selling his wares." the teen smiled, putting the book away in a pocket. "Please, call me Gin."

"Gin," Zoro repeated with a shrug. "So how about we head to this supposedly amazing dango place I heard about? Some flea-bag recommended it to me."

"So you talk about me behind my back to my face... very audacious, aren't you?"

"I've been called worse."

"Well, let's go then."

Kakashi easily directed Zoro towards the restaurant. Zoro didn't really complain about Kakashi holding onto his sleeve, as he had been placated easily enough with alcohol.

The friendship between Zoro and Kakashi was an interesting one. Where Zoro was brash, and more than willing fight; while Kakashi was unruffled and tactical.

No-one in the village could know about their friendship, due to the fact that Zoro was for one, an outsider that wasn't really associated with any one village. According to Zoro's ID, he was from a rural village in Fire Country. If anyone asked, he was just another orphan who had lost his parents to some harsh reality of the world. But Kakashi knew that was a lie. If people knew *how much* of an outsider he really was, well...Kakashi didn't want to think about what T&I might be willing to do to Zoro. Even though the Konoha Ninja still treated Zoro with some respect, there was still some apprehension involved. Because Zoro wasn't directly allied with Konoha, and in fact associated with other Shinobi villages, it led to some Shinobi not being comfortable with him. They just didn't know what to make of the teen, and this was coming from people who essentially made it their living being able to read others easily.

From what Kakashi knew, Zoro wasn't in anyone's Bingo Book just yet,

but they still kept an eye on him. He only went after kenjutsu users, and always turned their bodies in to the village that they originated from. Zoro also went after wanted felons, bandits, and people who targeted the weak and defenseless. He never targeted Ninja if they didn't wield a sword. Even when he would have gotten hundreds if not thousands more in ryo if he had decided to sell the deceased to a rival village. When he had been questioned about why he didn't go for the money, Zoro had various responses along the lines of 'I don't want to be weighed down by money, I'm just trying to survive,' and 'they were from this village, right? Then they deserve to be buried somewhere familiar.'

It was interesting that Zoro had more honor than the people he hunted. Of course, Shinobi had no honor.

If people knew that Kakashi associated with an outsider, both of them possibly risked the chance of being executed. But Kakashi thought rules that disallowed friendships were foolish; he could tell that Zoro was a guy anyone with common sense would want on their side. Plus, he was entertaining. Zoro didn't care for rules that much, and besides – he would happily accept the challenge, but that also meant he would cut down the people who killed Kakashi.

The dango restaurant was pretty busy, and they'd be lucky to get a spot on the floor. But apparently "Gin" already had reservations, and going by the reactions of the staff, he was well-known at this establishment. Zoro didn't question it nor did he care.

A waitress led them to a booth and took their order. Kakashi decided on black tea, while Zoro of course ordered sake. They agreed on a large platter that offered a variety of dango, and while they waited for their food, the two decided to catch up. There was also enough hubbub going on around them that their conversation could be pretty much kept private.

"So, have you changed your mind about-what was his name, Mihawk, and decided to stay in Konoha?" Kakashi asked. He knew the answer, but perhaps Zoro had somehow changed his mind. Konoha certainly could use a man like Zoro, and Kakashi wouldn't have to hide his association with him.

"Nah," Zoro smirked. "I still need to get a bit stronger before I face him..." Zoro looked thoughtful. "I know where he is, but finding him is another matter entirely. The ocean's a huge place."

Kakashi chose not to point out that Zoro had a difficult time finding his way out of a cardboard box. Finding someone as powerful as this Mihawk guy seemed to be was going to be quite the challenge.

"...so once I manage to find someone who'll take me to the next populated island north of the Elemental Nations, I'll continue on until I reach the Grand Line and face Mihawk."

Zoro's eyes glinted as he smirked. "I've heard stories about Seven Swordsmen of the Mist...any idea where I could start looking for those guys? I traveled through Mist for a while on my way to Konoha, but ended up in the desert..."

Kakashi chose to ignore Zoro's indirect admittance that he had gotten lost...again.

"Mah...I don't think you want to go up against *those* guys," Kakashi seriously warned as he refilled his teacup. "They're pretty damn ruthless. They don't use just any ordinary, everyday swords, and they have powerful Jutsu for backup if you are actually lucky enough to get their swords away from them."

"Then that just means I'll have to get stronger." Zoro replied with a determined glint in his eyes.

Kakashi sighed, and reached into his bag and pulled out various scrolls containing the most basic of Jutsu and shoved them towards Zoro. Technically, he wasn't breaking any laws by sharing what the scrolls contained. At Zoro's questioning glance, Kakashi explained,

"I know you're very limited in what you can do in terms of Jutsu; this is stuff they teach at the academy and even Genin. At least if you're able to combine elements into your swordsmanship like the guys you foolishly want to fight, you at least have a chance of not dying within the first few minutes."

Zoro frowned, reading in between the lines of what Kakashi was saying. *I don't want to lose another friend if I can help it.*

"Heh, thanks, I'll put 'em to good use." Zoro put the scrolls into his travel bag. He was looking forward to seeing what Kakashi had given him. "So, how're things going with you?"

Kakashi shrugged. "I'm considering giving up the dog mask. Doing so means I can stick closer to home for longer periods of time, and possibly have my own team of students forced on me."

"If the future generation is in your hands no matter what capacity, I worry for us all."

"Rightly so," Kakashi agreed gravely.

Zoro smirked and Kakashi snorted.

For the next hour, Kakashi and Zoro caught up on news around the village and what Zoro had been doing since he had last visited Konoha a little over a year ago.

*o*o*o*

It was late in the evening, and Kakashi had left Zoro to his own devices (at Zoro's slightly irritated insistence. It wasn't *his* fault that other people kept getting lost and moving stuff around!) But Zoro said he would ask for directions, and Kakashi had to take a few jabs at Zoro's abysmal sense of direction.

"Hmm," Kakashi put a hand to his chin in thought. "The path of life is a confusing one, Zoro-kun. I must say you certainly get lost on it much easier and more frequently than I do."

"I don't get lost, you perverted flea-bag!" Zoro defended.

"Perverted flea-bag?" That insult was a stab to his ego, if only a little.

"See you 'round, Gin."

"Don't go killing yourself with a stupid death, Zoro-kun." Kakashi warned in a good-natured tone.

"I'll try not to. Take care of yourself, Flea-bag." Zoro smirked and waved, departing down the street and disappearing into the crowd.

Kakashi held his hand up until he could no longer see the Swordsman. He lowered his hand and stuffed it into his pocket. Kakashi headed the opposite way and made his way towards the inn that "Gin" had checked into. It wouldn't make any sense for someone to check-in, yet never check out. On his way, "Gin" sold a few books to customers. In the morning, "Gin" would leave Konoha, at least for a while. This one persona of many helped Kakashi practice his ability to disguise himself even from those who knew him using practical means.

Kakashi had to chuckle to himself when he was pretty sure he had seen Gai earlier, and his self-proclaimed rival hadn't even known it

was him.

*o*o*o*

Zoro randomly turned down another street, and having finished off the last of his third bottle of sake, he was considering turning in for the night. While it had tasted good, Zoro was only slightly buzzed. He wasn't even close to the level of pleasantly drunk he preferred. Now to find a trashcan so he could dispose of the empty bottle... that was when Zoro heard yelling. It was drunk and belligerent, and probably wasn't worth getting involved in. Drunken brawls could be fun, but it was probably best not to get involved in one here...that was kind of disappointing.

Mentally complaining about the unfairness of not being able to get into a brawl, Zoro continued on his way, when he noticed he was passing the loud drunk who was now screaming while holding someone up in the air. But that wasn't what gave Zoro pause. It was the fact that the man was holding a *freaking kid* up by his shirt collar and it was clear that the man had a tight enough grip that the boy was struggling to breath. The kid's hands uselessly fought back as he tried to pry the man's grip from his collar.

"Stupid Demon! It's your fault my Nozumi died!"

Zoro now glared at the other festival-goers who simply stood by and watched in trepidation and even anger; but their gazes were not directed at the man, but rather the kid. Why wasn't anyone doing anything?! Just because those idiots were happy to stand around doing nothing didn't mean Zoro was.

"Why couldn't you have die-!"

An empty sake jar was thrown against the back of Moritoko's head, shattering on impact, accompanied by an angry shout. He turned to look, but instead of seeing who threw the bottle, he saw a green blur.

Zoro ducked low and rammed the butt of his sword into the man's gut with such force that Moritoko actually flew back and landed in an ungraceful heap a few feet away. He had released his hold on the kid, and Zoro deftly caught the boy mid-air and held him close. Zoro held the kid in such a way that if the stupid drunk retaliated, Zoro would be the first to get hit. He wielded Wado Ichimonji in his other hand and pointed it at Moritoko with a dangerous glare that would have sent any sensible person running.

"What the f*cking *hell* you *bastard*, he's a f*cking kid!"

Naruto gazed up at his would-be savior, and his eyes widened upon recognition. The only people who held him like the strange teen was doing was Gramps and Iruka. Naruto gripped the stranger's haramaki in tight fists.

The other festival goers were looking on in shock, while only a few decided it would be better to run and others decided to report the incident to the Uchiha police.

Moritoko slowly stood up, gasping for air and dispensed the contents of his stomach seconds later. He wiped away any residue on his chin with the back of his hand, and looked for the one who attacked him. His eyes fell on the kid holding the little Demon protectively in his arms.

"You have no idea what that brat is!" screamed Moritoko.

A few other villagers now tried to intervene. One man stepped up and placed his hand on Moritoko's shoulder. "Mori-san, let's go."

An older woman looked nervous as she added, "Don't be a fool! Just drop it!"

Moritoko just shoved them off.

Zoro glared dangerously at the villagers. They were willing to step up when a belligerent drunk was screaming at him, but *not* when someone was beating up on a freaking toddler? Zoro briefly glanced down at the kid who stared up at him with blue eyes. The kid looked somewhat familiar... He *was* a toddler, right? He was kinda small, so it was hard to tell. Zoro wasn't very good at guessing people's ages anyway...

Zoro sensed something deep within the boy, but he couldn't exactly say what it was. It was dark and terrifying, and anyone with any amount of sense would have dropped the kid right then and there had they felt that dark energy. But Zoro wasn't like other people.

Yelling drew Zoro's attention back to the drunk who decided that he would charge at him. Zoro gave Moritoko a bored look and easily flipped the sword around in his hand so that he could strike his opponent with the back of his blade. To the untrained eye, it simply looked as if Zoro had adjusted his sword to get a better grip.

Zoro easily sidestepped Moritoko's charge and Zoro swung his sword down towards the back of Moritoko's leg. He ignored the screams as the sword struck true and Moritoko's knee gave a sickening crack. Moritoko stumbled and unwittingly made his injury worse as he tried catching himself. The man fell to the ground screaming and rolling back and forth clutching his leg.

That was when a few men with badges and others wearing masks showed up.

A masked man motioned to Moritoko. "Take care of him, Hawk."

Hawk silently nodded and grabbed the aforementioned man by the back of his shirt and disappeared in a swirl of leaves.

"Drop your weapon!" a man ordered, but Zoro glared at them.

He recognized Kakashi, but of course Zoro acted like he had no idea who the other one was behind the mask.

"No way am I giving up my sword." He slightly adjusted so that the boy was facing away from the newcomers. "So you intervene when some fat ass like that gets injured, but not when he's attacking a kid? No way am I gonna surrender to low-life dipsh*ts like that."

"Listen, kid," one of the men spoke up. He had a fan insignia on his shirt and red eyes. "It's best to come down to the station quietly, so put the boy down-"

"*Like hell.*" Zoro spat. His glare made the others hesitate to approach him. There seemed to be something dangerous in the green-haired teen; it was dormant, but still dangerous. "Do any of you even realize or even *f*cking care* that that drunk bastard was *choking* this kid? And *no-one*," Zoro's furious and accusing glare was directed at the other villagers as he spoke, many of them flinching back in response. "No-one cared! No-one did a thing to stop it!" Zoro's tone leaked poisonous sarcasm. "So *forgive* me if I'm not willing to part with my sword or leave this kid with these low-life, sh*tty excuses for human beings!"

Another ANBU wearing a mask like that of a monkey showing up slightly broke the thick tension in the air. "The Third has ordered me to escort you to Hokage Tower... and to bring the...boy."

Monkey stood by Zoro as he easily sheathed his sword, and then adjusted the kid again so that he could carry him more comfortably.

Zoro held the boy in a way that he could still draw his sword. Kakashi quickly came up on Zoro's other side and grabbed his arm. Zoro could feel the tension in Kakashi's grip, but Zoro couldn't place why.

Was it because Zoro had broken another guy's leg? Was it about the kid? That store clerk obviously hadn't wanted the kid in his store. What was it about this kid?

That drunk idiot thought choking the kid was justified while others simply looked in apparent approval. There was also the fact that Zoro thought he had felt something malevolent in the kid, but that didn't matter to him. Swords carried dangerous Curses. Zoro figured that the kid meant people could carry dangerous Curses too.

They walked in tense silence, or at least it was tense for people who weren't Zoro, Kakashi and Naruto. Fugaku had his Sharingan activated, just waiting for Zoro to try something, while Monkey had a kunai openly displayed in his hand. Already, there were people whispering, but they wisely did it out of sight and earshot of the ANBU and head of Uchiha police.

They finally entered the Third's office, and Hiruzen motioned for Zoro to take a seat.

Zoro slowly complied, and as he settled, he studied the others present in the room; an older man and woman, certainly not a couple (or at least, Zoro didn't think so) and another old man who looked as if he had been a burn victim at some point in the past because he was covered in bandages practically from head-to-toe, with only one eye and his mouth exposed. Something about him didn't sit right with Zoro; but the teen couldn't place it. He just knew he held an instant dislike for the guy.

Zoro was introduced to Utatane Koharu, Mitokado Homura, and Shimura Danzo.

"First off, I'd like to thank you for protecting young Naruto, here." Hiruzen smiled fondly at the boy who responded with a grin that showed he was missing a tooth.

"Naruto, huh?" Zoro glanced down at the kid who looked at him upon hearing the teen say his name. "I'm Roronoa Zoro, nice to meet you, kid."

"I'm Uzumaki Naruto! Thanks for beatin' up that guy. It was really cool, ya' know."

"Monkey, please take Naruto home." Hiruzen requested.

When Monkey reached for the boy, he wrapped his arms tightly around Zoro's neck in vice grip and vehemently screamed, "NO! DON' WANNA!"

Zoro cringed at the level of volume next to his ear. Naruto refused to let go and it was clear that Zoro wasn't exactly used to kids because he slightly looked uncomfortable with how Naruto didn't want to leave him. Kids usually *avoided* him, because he tended to look scary.

"Kid. Kid! *NARUTO!*" Zoro finally made himself heard above the kid's caterwauling. Naruto looked at him with wide, tear-filled eyes. Naruto's lower lip quivered. A pang of *something* shot through Zoro's chest at that look. Maybe because kids *never* gave Zoro that look. Dammit, he was starting to feel sorry for the kid.

"Mah, how about Monkey waits with Naruto-kun in the hall?" Kakashi spoke up. "When you're done in here, Naruto can properly say his goodbyes."

"Sound good?" Zoro asked the still-sniffing Naruto.

Naruto looked as if he were going to break out into tears again, and not wanting to subject his ears to another round of the kid's wails, Zoro thought quickly.

"Listen, I'll make you a deal..." Zoro paused for a moment. He had no idea how to talk to kids. "You know what a deal is, right?"

Naruto nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, I do."

"Alright," Zoro removed one of his earrings and handed it to the kid. "I want you to take good care of this for me, okay? How about this," he glanced at Hiruzen, then back to Naruto. "Go with Monkey-butt there and stand out in the hall. When we're done, you'll give me back my earring, alright?"

Monkey fortunately had a mask to hide his face-fault at Zoro's nickname for him.

Naruto laughed at Monkey's nickname.

"Like a Ninja mission?" Naruto asked with an excited glint in his eyes.

"Of the most important kind," Zoro responded gravely.

Naruto grinned and held the precious earring in a tight fist. "OH BOY! THIS IS AWESOME! MY FIRST MISSION!" Naruto turned to Hiruzen. "Suck on that, Gramps! I'm tot'lly ready for missions!"

"Of course, Naruto." Hiruzen responded, inwardly enjoying Koharu and Homura's displeasure at Naruto's disrespect.

Monkey and Naruto both exited out into the hall, and closed the door behind them. Kakashi casually leaned against the wall to observe. Zoro was one of those people who had the dumbest of lucks, and if anyone could get out of this unscathed, it was Zoro.

"What's this about?" Zoro crossed his arms. Something about this wasn't right.

"This is about the boy," the old woman replied.

Hiruzen held up a hand before she could continue. "Naruto is a special case, Roronoa-san, I'd like to thank you for coming to Naruto's defense."

"What is inside him?" Zoro asked bluntly. "There's no way Naruto is some normal kid."

Kakashi resisted the urge to face-palm.

"That's classified information." Mitokado said in a voice that gave Zoro the impression that the man thought he was being authoritative, but Zoro just found his tone annoying.

"Okay." Zoro shrugged, simply accepting the answer. He scratched his ear with a pinky. His response was obviously not what the old bags were expecting; and they found his attitude annoying and off-putting. But Zoro could put two-and-two together. He suspected that Naruto had that Fox Demon thing in him.

"But I'm curious about something..." Zoro scowled, and something about his expression put those present on edge. "Why was that drunk bastard picking on a kid, and why were those stupid gawkers not doing something about it? Any civilized person would have stepped in, and if *I'm* what counts for civilized in this place, then that's f*cked up."

The old woman scowled at his use of language, but Zoro couldn't have cared less.

"Is Naruto important? I mean, is the kid special?" Zoro asked. "Because it's kinda weird that an apparently homeless brat is garnering this much attention."

So Zoro had caught on, or at least he had an idea of what Naruto's situation was. Kakashi knew that Zoro could be an idiot at times, but he wasn't stupid.

"He is to be Shinobi of Konoha, if that is what you are asking, Roronoa-san." Danzo said.

Zoro hated how his name sounded coming out of the man's mouth. Why was this partially mummified bastard grating on his nerves so much?

"Yeah, sure." Zoro snorted derisively. "If you expect a kid like him to become a Ninja of this village, then don't you think you'd want to keep him on your side?"

Hiruzen slightly narrowed his eyes at Zoro. The teen *knew* something, he was sure of it. But because he liked Zoro, Hiruzen didn't want to risk calling him out.

Danzo also shared the thought of the boy before knowing more than he let on. Roronoa was probably shrewder than he was leading them to believe.

"Anyway," Zoro continued. "Does Naruto have a family?"

"...He does not," Hiruzen said honestly.

"Brat's too skinny," Zoro muttered. He then focused on the others, again.

"I saw him getting kicked out of a store; that dumbass clerk thought that Naruto was going to steal something, even though the kid had money. You people are doing a real bang-up job of making Naruto *want* to be a Ninja of Konoha. I wouldn't be surprised nor would I blame him if he ended up being one of those Ninja with a scratch through his headband."

"Now see here-!" Koharu started, but she was cut off by Zoro asking,

"...What's going to happen to Naruto? Does he have anyone to care for him?"

"He does have a caretaker, and although they could be doing a better job on correcting his behavior, the boy is well-taken care of."

"Bullsh*t." Zoro said, glaring at Mitokado.

"I do not appreciate that use of language with me, or in the presence of the Hokage, no less." Mitokado glared disapprovingly, and was annoyed when Zoro was apparently ignoring him.

"How old is he?"

"I don't see how-" Koharu started, but Hiruzen held up a hand.

"Why do you ask?"

"My first thought was that he was a toddler," Zoro shrugged. "Not that I'm an expert, but the kid doesn't seem like a four or five-year-old."

"...He's eight." Hiruzen replied. To say that he was surprised by the glare Zoro was giving them would be an understatement.

"He's *eight*?! Naruto is *way* too small and thin for *any* kid. Whoever's responsible is doing a sh*tty job. Forgive me if I don't buy your bullsh*t, gramps. 'He's important to us, but not important enough to be fed a proper diet, stop idiots from unfairly kicking him out or stop drunk bastards from beating him up.'"

Zoro visibly seethed for a few minutes before quietly saying, "If I were to offer to take him, what would you say?"

"That's impossible." Koharu spoke before her companions could say anything. "Although you have assisted us in the past, you affiliate with other villages even though you haven't allied with them. There's no way we would let Naruto be taken by an outsider such as yourself, Roronoa-san."

That was a dismissal if he ever heard one, and not even an "I'm sorry, but you can't take him" was in her little speech – not that he cared.

"Okay...well, I was just curious." Fugaku watched Zoro's every micro expression and listened to his heartbeat, waiting for something, *anything* to be amiss. "There's no way I could take some loudmouth brat with me anyway..." Zoro paused thoughtfully. "You know, to be honest...if I didn't have that man to find, I'd probably stick around."

Zoro stood up and started for the door. "I'm leaving. I'll be around a few more days, but I'll try make parting from Naruto as painless as possible."

Fugaku could tell that Zoro was telling the truth, but at the same time, he could see controlled anger rippling underneath the surface, especially when Mitokado said,

"Actually, we'd prefer if you did not associate yourself with the child." Koharu was stern. "It would be for both of your best interests."

"Koharu." Hiruzen was equally stern. "At least let the two say goodbye to one another."

Koharu's scowl deepened, but she relented.

"...Look... I'll just stay the night and leave in the morning." He glared at the old bags. Well, the Third Hokage guy was actually alright, but the others were all pieces of sh*t.

"Wait, I still need a statement-" Fugaku started, but Zoro cut him off with a glare.

"*Fine*," Zoro huffed as he fished out his ID and held it up for Fugaku to see. "You want a statement? I'll give you one. I, Roronoa Zoro defended a f*cking kid from a drunk moron while everyone else stood around gawking. I'm surprised that they didn't start throwing money, they certainly thought it was entertaining enough. I broke that bastard's leg with my sword, when in reality I wanted to relieve him of his limbs." Zoro glared at the old people while Kakashi resisted face-palming *again*. "And here, the concern is whether or not *I'm* a threat and nobody seems to give a single flying f*ck that Naruto was getting strangled. When were you and those masked people planning to show up? When it was most convenient? You all have *such great timing*."

Zoro took his ID back from Fugaku without asking if he was done with it and stuffed it back into a pocket hidden behind his haramaki. He was furious at these people, but he wasn't going to let his anger get him too carried away. "If I'm such a threat, then Monkey-butt or Flea-bag here can escort me back to Seiko Inn. Hell, even put a watch on me all night if you have to. I'll more than happily be escorted out of this village in the morning. I can't stay anyway. As I've said, there's a man I promised to find, and he's not going to wait around for me to find him."

"You honestly can't think you're leaving?!" Koharu demanded, angry with Zoro's attitude, but was answered with Zoro leaving and slamming the door behind him hard enough to crack the frame. Hiruzen sighed at the damage, but he also sympathized with the teen. Zoro had pretty much voiced Hiruzen's personal opinions on the situation surrounding Naruto.

"Are you just going to let that boy leave?" Koharu demanded, insulted the teen had blatantly disrespected her.

Kakashi slowly opened the door, and it came off the hinges in his hand. "Mah, Roronoa-san certainly doesn't seem to know his own strength."

Kakashi exited the office and carefully placed the now useless door back into place.

"He clearly knows more than he let on." Danzo added. "His being a bounty hunter could only be an elaborate ruse for gaining possession of the Jinchuuriki."

Hiruzen sighed again. "I honestly doubt that. Roronoa has a pretty consistent track record with going after kenjutsu users, bandits, and even the occasional tyrant. Plus, I've heard more than one story about an odd, green-haired kenjutsu user who goes after people who pick on defenseless women and children.

"He's also stated his goal of finding the most powerful kenjutsu user he can. The boy's trying to work his way up in the world. There's also the fact that he's clearly a wanderer."

Hiruzen had observed Zoro's interactions with the villagers before – he clearly had no desire to associate with children, while he wasn't hostile, he wasn't friendly either. According to the ANBU who had also observed Zoro, the boy scowled at anyone and everyone, and on more than one occasion had made children cry when they so much as met each other's gaze.

"We'll do as Roronoa-san suggested: post guards on him." Hiruzen said. "I'll assign a few ANBU to keep an eye on things until Roronoa leaves Konoha."

Danzo figured it wouldn't hurt to post a few of his own agents to watch over the odd swordsman as well.

Homura and Koharu were letting Hiruzen know how much his

decision bothered them, but he didn't really seem to care. He was thinking about something else entirely.

"Roronoa referred to Naruto by name. Did any of you realize that? He's only known the boy for a short amount of time, yet he willing to be more personal than those who have known Naruto his entire life, and Naruto seemed unwilling to part with him."

It was unfortunate that Naruto had attached himself to someone who couldn't and wouldn't stick around. Hiruzen sighed yet again, pinching the bridge of his nose. He was feeling his age. "Why do you think Roronoa was angry?"

Before either Homura or Koharu could respond, Monkey burst in through the window – it was a very fortunate thing that there was no glass.

"Hokage-sama!" Monkey bowed as he quickly reported to the village leader. "Eighteen minutes ago, Roronoa Zoro and Uzumaki Naruto disappeared! The other ANBU are currently searching the village and others are keeping watch at every potential exit. Bird and Tiger are currently investigating the Seiko Inn where Dog reported Roronoa to be staying."

"What happened?!" demanded Koharu.

"Well...you see..." Monkey's face flushed underneath his mask. He should commit seppuku for this failure – but that was a bit extreme. "I was escorting Roronoa and Naruto with Dog through the village when it happened..."

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A very irritated-looking Zoro stalked out of the Hokage's office, and Monkey inwardly winced at the strength Zoro used to slam the door. Cracks appeared on the wooden door and around the frame. Obviously, the teen was much stronger than he looked, Monkey observed. He also didn't like whatever the Hokage and his advisors had said. The ANBU had heard muffled voices that briefly turned into shouting, but since no-one had raised the alarm, it hadn't been cause for concern.

"ZORO!" Naruto shouted exuberantly, and he ran into Zoro who grunted at the impact. Zoro got down on one knee so that he could be level with Naruto, and for a brief second Monkey thought that he saw an odd expression like sadness cross Zoro's face. It lasted for such a

short time, that Monkey would have thought that he imagined it. He knew better than to disregard any expressions a person made, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

"You still have my earring, kid?"

"You bet!" Naruto held out his sweaty palm to Zoro.

"Thanks."

Zoro put his earring back in, and at that moment Dog came out of the Hokage's office. Monkey winced when the door came off of its hinges.

With a comment of, "Mah, Roronoa-san certainly doesn't seem to know his own strength," Kakashi placed the door back in its proper, but now useless place.

Naruto was chattering non-stop. "Do you like ramen? Ichiraku's ramen is my favorite. Do you wanna go? How 'bout tomorrow, since it's closed righ'now 'cause of the festival?"

Zoro frowned, unsure of how he should break the news to the kid. "Uh, ramen's really good. Listen, kid...something's come up, so I'll be leaving in the morning."

Naruto's face fell. His expression embodied all of the hurt and disappointment that one kid could muster. "You're leavin'?"

"Yeah, I can't stay, unfortunately...How about we go to that ramen place some other time? My treat."

It wasn't an empty promise if he didn't specify what time.

"OK...but don' think I'm gonna enjoy it."

Naruto's sadness was short-lived apparently, as he was suddenly a chatterbox as they made their way out of the Hokage tower.

"We have to escort Roronoa-san to his hotel now, so you should head back home, Naruto-kun." Kakashi said.

"Aw..." Naruto wilted for a second. Suddenly he brightened. "Can I head back with you? Please, please, *PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE!*"

"Sure, why not?" Zoro shrugged. Mostly because he was somewhat annoyed with Naruto's increasing volume as he pleaded with the men.

"YAY!"

Zoro grimaced as Naruto's cheer was much louder than his pleading. The kid certainly had an impressive set of lungs. Monkey scowled from underneath his mask, while Kakashi thoughtfully observed.

"...Mah, it will make their goodbye a bit easier."

Naruto took hold of Zoro's hand, smiling happily. Zoro glanced down in surprise, then looked up to watch where he was going with a look of slight irritation. He didn't dislike kids, but he didn't exactly tolerate them either.

"You're tall." Naruto suddenly said amidst all his chatter. "Can I ride on your shoulders?"

"*Huh?*" Zoro looked dumbly down at the grinning boy. Since when did kids actually *like* him? Pay attention to one lonely kid and suddenly they're behind you whenever you turn around...that was kind of sad, actually.

Zoro scowled, and at first Naruto thought he had said something wrong, but then a pair of strong hands lifted him up and he was placed on Zoro's shoulders. "If you tell me to neigh, giddy-up or any of that nonsense, I'm going to drop you."

"Okay!"

Naruto grinned. He hoped that he would be as tall as Zoro one day.

Zoro felt Kakashi's hand on his arm, but it felt tense. Zoro glanced at him from his peripheral vision, wondering what his deal was.

Monkey walked stoically beside them.

Although it was fairly late, there was a flurry of activity around them. There was still a decent-sized crowd; with there being enough people still awake as if it were the middle of the day. At that moment, fireworks went off, lighting up the night sky.

At that same moment, a boy named Kiba was lighting up a bundle of firecrackers under a stall while his friend Shino looked on warily.

"I do not think this is a good idea, Kiba-kun. Why? Because it could incite panic. What if it starts a fire? People could get hurt. What then?"

"Don't be such a tightwad, Shino!" Kiba harshly whispered.

He either ignored or didn't hear Shino mutter, "I'm not a tightwad. Why? I'm simply being practical."

"Besides, I got this idea from Naruto. He's an idiot, but he's a funny guy so it'll be fine."

Shino sighed as he decided not to argue with Kiba's weak reasoning or lack thereof. He watched as Kiba tossed the small roll of firecrackers under the stall where it was well-hidden from Human eyes. Kiba ran, with Shino close behind to various other stalls weaving in-between the crowd and repeated the process.

A minute or two went by, when suddenly there was a loud popping noise from one of the stalls. The two people manning the stall started yelling. Various people lurched in surprise, looking for the origin of the popping and yelling. But when the firecrackers went off at the other stalls, it incited panic, just as Shino said it would.

People were rushing back and forth, and Monkey knew that he and Dog would have to work on crowd control. Plus, in their panic various people risked tripping and getting trampled.

"I'll go high, you go low!" Monkey shouted out.

If Monkey had been aware of Zoro's tendency to wander, he would have told Kakashi to stay with Zoro. But Kakashi had formulated a ridiculous plan that he had no idea whether or not it would work. So he simply let go of Zoro's arm to help Monkey with crowd control.

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In Zoro's mind, he questioned why Kakashi was getting himself lost. There were people running every direction, so Zoro decided pick one that seemed like the best option and head that way too. Except he found himself at the same dead-end three times. Zoro continued to wander, trying to find Seiko Inn, but he was getting further and further away from it. Seiko Inn was in the North District, and Zoro was on top of a tall building in the West District.

"Damn, they keep moving the buildings around..." Zoro muttered.

To Naruto, this was a grand adventure.

Zoro continued walking "up" because logically, that was where North

was located on a map. So perhaps he had to walk around this building here so he could get to higher ground and find Seiko Inn. Zoro walked until he suddenly stopped. Something wasn't right...

"How the hell did the village get over there?!" Zoro demanded. He slightly grimaced as a softly snoring Naruto drooled into his hair.

Zoro was about to head for the village again to try and find Seiko Inn, when he felt a familiar presence appear behind him.

"Marimo-san, this is a pleasant night to be out walking, no?"

Zoro whipped around to face Kakashi who had removed his dog mask, and fortunately Naruto wasn't thrown off. He was only slightly jostled, and the boy simply shifted in his sleep before resuming snoring.

"The hell, Kakashi? You went and got yourself lost, and now Konoha is over *there*!"

Kakashi smiled; the only reason Zoro could tell was because his visible eye crinkled at the edges. The Copy-Nin glanced up at the full moon, his mood turned somber. "It's a beautiful night, is it not, Zoro-kun?"

The mood change was enough to cause Zoro to quirk his eyebrow at the man. "Uh, Kakashi?"

Kakashi knew that what he was about to do was committing high treason. If anyone from Konoha found out what he had done, and what he was planning to do, he would more than definitely be executed. Hell, he probably would be following in his father's footsteps...

"I have a selfish request to make of you, Zoro-kun."

Zoro said nothing, waiting for Kakashi to continue.

"Please, take Naruto-kun with you."

Zoro blinked, trying to process what Kakashi had just said. Then Zoro just about yelled, "WHAT THE HELL?! WHY?!"

"Huh?" Naruto sleepily muttered, but he stayed asleep.

Kakashi quickly shushed Zoro, then explained, "It's complicated, but..." Kakashi's expression, or at least his eye, looked regretful. "You see, Naruto-kun was the son of my former sensei. Minato-sensei and his wife Kushina-san were like second parents to me. They even

declared me to be Naruto's 'official' older brother." Kakashi pulled out an old photo from his pack and handed it to Zoro.

Zoro thought that Kakashi looked more serious as a child than he did as an adult. He also had two visible eyes at the time the picture was taken. He stood in between a smiling blond man who was ruffling an irritated-looking Kakashi's hair, and a clearly pregnant red-haired woman who had one hand on Kakashi's shoulder, while with the other she gave a 'victory' sign. Even looking at them from a photo, they really seemed like nice people.

"They were killed eight years ago, when the Kyuubi attacked Konoha. It's rather complicated, but both Minato-sensei and Kushina-san died saving Konoha and sealing the Kyuubi into Naruto."

"I thought that I felt something...that's why all those people were..." Zoro scowled. "Bastards. Wait, if you were supposed to be his older brother, why aren't you taking care of him?"

Kakashi truly looked regretful as he stared at the ground between his feet. "It is one of my biggest regrets...after losing my sensei and Kushina-san, I couldn't bring myself to care for Naruto. How could I? I was barely functioning as it was. Hell, I'm still just barely managing to hold it together at times."

Zoro didn't know what to say; it was clearly a topic that made Kakashi uncomfortable. "What about the other clans? Couldn't they have taken him?"

"There were those who really wanted to, but others argued against it."

It had all come down to politics. While a good portion of powerful and influential clans stepped up to care for Naruto, the clans couldn't agree on who should take him. They had argued about how he should be raised and who should raise him. It would have been one thing if Naruto had simply been one of those orphaned by the attack, but the fact that he was a Jinchuuriki made things all the more difficult. Finally, it was decided that no-one would be taking the baby.

Of course, that brought up the question of why civilians couldn't take Naruto. Zoro scowled even more when he learned that while the Fourth had wanted people to see Naruto as a hero who saved the village; but the villagers only saw Naruto as the monster. It got so bad, the Third made a law against even speaking about what Naruto was. But obviously, the law hadn't helped Naruto. People; *civilians*, didn't want a monster in their home, so Naruto's chances of getting adopted

had dwindled down to pretty much zero.

In Zoro's opinion, he wouldn't even have told civilians about what Naruto was. When his master had introduced him to Jutsu and Seals, he couldn't even wrap his head around them. But through careful study and practice, he had come to learn and even master basic to mid-level Sealing techniques. Sealing away a dead body was one thing, but Sealing away something alive and as powerful as the Kyuubi – well, Zoro had assume that it was powerful, given the aura he had felt along with the way people feared the kid – Sealing living things was advanced. It was like graduating from using wooden swords for techniques and mastering a real sword. But civilians had no reason to learn about even the most basic of Sealing techniques when Ninja were around to do it.

"So I leave with the kid, then what?" Zoro questioned.

Kakashi could do nothing but shrug. "Naruto will have a happier life with someone who is able to care for him...plus, if the world really is as big and incredible as you say it is, he should get the chance to enjoy it, right?"

"...I suppose..." Zoro frowned. "But isn't the kid supposed to be a great Ninja of Konoha or something?"

"Well, yes. Since he hasn't gotten his headband yet, he can't be labeled as a missing Nin. I'm not asking that you raise him with the expectation of returning and being loyal to Konoha, but I don't want him to hate it either. Let him make his own decisions. And here," Kakashi handed Zoro another bag, one that was filled with a few more scrolls and supplies. "That should last you both for long while."

Zoro stared down at the contents of the bag. "You sure about this, Kakashi?"

"...Yes."

"You don't sound convinced. Should I worry?"

"Not about me, no." Kakashi handed Zoro the photograph, "Keep this... Naruto has the right to know who his parents are. Namikaze Minato and Uzumaki Kushina. They both were incredibly strong and respected among their peers."

Zoro sighed heavily. "Got it. I'll take care of the kid."

There was barking and howling in the distance, and Kakashi recognized the sounds of the Inuzuka Clan tracking down their prey.

Zoro shifted Naruto a bit so that he could throw the second bag over his shoulder. "Take care of yourself, Flea-Bag."

"You too, Marimo-san. Good luck."

Zoro turned to leave – well, more like he started heading for the village again, but then he suddenly turned left into the trees and came out on the right (!) side of the path ahead. It briefly made Kakashi wonder if Zoro had some sort of dormant Kekkei Genkai that he wasn't even aware of which caused him to somehow teleport around. Zoro constantly insisted that the people around him were the ones getting lost; that the paths and buildings were moving. Perhaps in Zoro's perception, they somehow were. That would probably explain some things, but not much.

Kakashi then decided to circle the perimeter of Konoha while thinking up a legitimate explanation for the major sh*t storm he had a hand in causing while coming out alive and in one piece at the end of it.

As Zoro navigated his way through the surrounding forest, he couldn't help but think, ** If I ever come back here, you better still be alive, Kakashi.**

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No matter how they looked at it, it *didn't make sense!* Tsume stared at the fifth dead-end alley Kuromaru had led her to for a *third* time. The Inuzuka Clan prided themselves on tracking people down, but this guy, some random *outsider* had somehow thrown the Nin-Dog's senses completely off. Every member of her Clan was having a similar problem. Either the scent ended or it backtracked or it crossed over the other – *Gah!*

Tsume punched a hole in a nearby fence. Screw property damage!

Finally, someone called her over the radio to tell her that they had tracked Roronoa's scent outside the village. Tsume and Kuromaru quickly headed over to the location where her nephew and his Nin-Dog had caught the scent. A few more her Clan members showed up to search, along with members of the Hyuuga and Aburame Clans.

They equally were thrown off. This guy constantly backtracked and at one point, the Ninja were completely shocked to find that Roronoa

had apparently *returned* to the village, and wandered around the Forest of Death before heading east.

Hana and her companions, the Three Haimaru Brothers were on the trail before it suddenly seemed like Roronoa backtracked *yet again!* This guy was clearly an expert. Hana and the Three Brothers tracked the scent heading west, for a few miles before it seemed like it simply cut off. It was like Roronoa had simply disappeared. They searched for any sign of how Roronoa could have disappeared, but there was nothing. Not even a trail for them to pick up again.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon as the Ninja returned home, failing their mission. Konoha's Jinchuuriki was gone.

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Elsewhere...

Zoro had just climbed a mountain. It wasn't that impressive of a feat as it was a small one, but it certainly confused the hell out of Zoro. He couldn't remember climbing a mountain, or how he had gotten there.

"How did I end up here?"

He knew that he needed to head west, but that was easier said than done. He had asked for directions from an a few people in a traveling caravan, and Zoro was beginning to think that they gave him wrong directions (they didn't) or maybe *they* were the ones who were lost (they weren't). In any case, Zoro would have to find his way to Suna eventually.

There was a large tree right by that he and Naruto could rest in, and in the morning, Zoro would figure things out. Might as well sleep.

Expensive Sake Recipes are why People don't get adopted

Chapter Summary

Zoro and Naruto make their way towards Suna, Naruto's disappearance from Konoha disrupts plans and causes trouble in more way than one.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Of course, Naruto was very confused when he woke up and found himself in a tree somewhere he didn't recognize. But he *did* recognize the person he was with.

"Zoro!"

"Huh?" Zoro sleepily opened his eyes. When his gaze fell on Naruto's expectant face, he grumbled a few obscenities under his breath then sat up.

"Zoro? I gotta pee."

Zoro pulled himself up and stretched, his body feeling sore from sleeping in a tree all night. He then helped the younger boy down and Naruto went to do his business. Zoro followed soon after, and he then pulled a water bottle out of the travel bag to rinse their hands because even though he wasn't a germaphobe, he still liked the idea of washing up.

The two sat down for a quick breakfast, and that was when they took the opportunity to talk.

"Why is your hair green?"

"I was born with it that way."

"Did your parents have green hair?"

"I don't know."

"S'you never knew your parents? S'okay! I dunno mine either, Dattebayo!"

Naruto continued with incessant questions, and Zoro pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Naruto, listen!" Zoro ordered, and the boy quickly shut his mouth and stared at Zoro with wide eyes, almost warily. "Look... You're with me because a Ninja from your village wanted to help you out. He saw the opening and took it."

"Who was he? Why'd he wanna help me?"

"Kakashi. He had his reasons."

Naruto made a face.

"Uh...silver hair like an old man but not old, one eye, face mask, smells like wet dog?"

"I know him, I think..." Naruto remembered a few times in the past that someone would leave small baskets of produce (and even snacks) on his doorstep at random intervals ever since he had gotten his own apartment roughly two years ago when he was forced out of the orphanage. The mysterious gift-giver would also leave a few simple children's books; but those were never as fun as the snacks. But boredom could be an overpowering thing; which could lead even people like Naruto to read – or at least, learn how. Much of what Naruto knew academically was self-taught, with the old man and Iruka helping him when they could. His teachers at the civilian school pretty much left him to his own devices.

But a figure that always kept their distance from him would show up every now and then, bearing gifts and never giving Naruto a chance to talk to them. When one of Naruto's old and used appliances broke, it was either fixed or replaced with a newer (but sometimes used) model. The first time it happened, Naruto thought that it was magic. Like tiny Ninjas sneaking in when he was out or asleep to replace or fix the things that were broken.

There were times when a few villagers would suddenly turn mean, especially around his birthday. But sometimes they took opportunities for sneak attacks – there was one such instance when he was five. It had been raining that day, and as Naruto made his way home, a few villagers had sprung on him. Naruto would have gotten seriously hurt if a man with crazy, silvery-white hair hadn't shown up. The man simply appeared, hovering over Naruto protectively, effectively scaring the villagers away. Naruto had been in the fetal position instinctively protecting his head. The man simply pulled Naruto to his

feet without a word.

"...W-who're you?" Naruto asked.

The man remained silent, and Naruto flinched a little when the man ruffled his hair before producing an orange umbrella within a puff of smoke. Opening the umbrella with an odd amount of flourish, the dog-masked man handed it over to Naruto, and then seconds later he was gone in a swirl of leaves.

The boy had considered his mysterious gift-giver and protector an odd sort of friend, and kept his friend a secret from even Iruka and the old man.

"Who's Kakashi?"

It was then Zoro remembered the photograph. Pulling it out of the satchel he had placed it in, Zoro handed it to Naruto.

"Who're...?"

"The guy's name is Namikaze Minato. He's your old man. The woman's name is Uzumaki Kushina. Seeing as how you apparently don't have any siblings, she's pregnant with you. The grouchy-looking kid is Kakashi. I guess you could say that he was-is kinda like a pseudo-older brother to you."

"These're my parents..." Tears began to roll down Naruto's cheeks. It wasn't lost on Naruto that his father looked very much like the Fourth Hokage. Plus...this Kakashi guy looked very much like the mysterious figure that always left him presents and kept a wide berth between them, excluding that day from when he was five. Naruto was confused, but he'd also admit to being angry. "Why'd they leave me behind? If he cared so much, why didn' this Kakashi guy take me in?!"

Zoro sighed, wishing he had some sake, or at least *some* kind of alcohol. It was too damn early in the morning for this.

"They died protecting you and the village from the Kyuubi. You know what that is, right?" At Naruto's nod, Zoro continued, "As for Kakashi, he was extremely close to your parents, and their deaths hit him pretty hard...he wasn't...in a place where he could take care of another person; especially a newborn. Kakashi was busy doing...Ninja things. Even if he had stepped up to take you in, he more than likely would've been shot down."

"Why?!" Naruto was suddenly on his feet demanding answers. "I could've had a home and a family! Why didn' anyone *tell* me about my parents?!" Holding up the picture and pointing, he added, "My dad was the Fourth Hokage, Dattebayo!"

"It's complicated, brat." Zoro said. "Now sit down, I'm not finished."

Naruto complied, albeit a bit grumpily.

"From what I understand, your parents died sealing the Kyuubi into you."

"What? Does that mean I'm the Kyuubi? S'that why the villagers hate me?"

Zoro thought about how he would explain this. "Okay, look..." he pulled Wado Ichimonji out of his belt and drew the sword, holding the sheath out in front of Naruto. "Think of it like this; you are the sheath, and..." Zoro sheathed the sword. "The sword is the Kyuubi. Right now, thanks to you, the Kyuubi is sheathed.

"A sword without a sheath can cut you, but because the sheath is there, the sword is safely handled and people don't have to worry about cutting their hand off. But only stupid people grab blades without some kind of protection. So you basically have your own personal sheathed sword. Get it?"

"I *think* so... but why couldn' I be adopted?"

"...It's...complicated." Zoro sighed, wondering how he was going to explain this to an eight-year-old. "You see, it was a power struggle. You were like a rare sake recipe, and all the other Clans in Konoha wanted that recipe, but no-one could agree on what Clan would have the right to own it and brew it."

Naruto blinked. He had never been compared to sake before. Since Naruto didn't say anything, Zoro continued.

"Because you have that Kyuubi thing, I guess someone somewhere thought that there was the potential risk of turning you against Konoha or something. They probably thought Kakashi would do something, as stupid as that sounds. As for the civilians, they're all dumbasses. They don't understand Seals. They were basically pointing at a sheathed sword laying harmlessly on a table yelling, 'It's a dangerous weapon that'll cut you' and 'People were killed by that sword, so obviously it's the sword's fault and not the one who wielded

it."

Naruto was silent as he contemplated what Zoro had told him. It made sense now, all of it.

"...Zoro? Why aren' you scared o' me? Why'd you help me?"

Zoro shrugged. "Why not? No-one should be treated like that, especially if they're being accused of something they didn't even do." The teen stood and stretched, his joints popping. He frowned when he looked at Naruto. "You're too damn skinny, brat... If I'm gonna train you-

"You're gonna train me?" Naruto jumped to his feet with a wide grin.

"You're gonna have to put on some weight, first." Zoro continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. The teen stood and looked down at Naruto with a grin that made shivers go up and down the younger boy's spine. "It's gonna be hell, I guarantee you that."

"Wha...why?" Training suddenly didn't sound as fun as it did just a few seconds ago.

"I'm not lowering my standards just 'cuz you're a kid. I'm gonna put you through the same training regimen I went through when I was your age."

Naruto thought that Zoro was cool, but he was also scary. A thought that Naruto would come to regret in the coming days was thinking that Zoro's idea of training was going to be fun and easy.

"Let's go."

Zoro and Naruto then set off.

*o*o*o*

Naruto, in spite of his young age and ignorance, *knew* that something wasn't right. He followed Zoro closely, clutching the strap of the second satchel Zoro had given him in clenched fists. They had been walking for a few hours now, and if Naruto didn't know any better, he was sure that they were walking in circles.

"Damn," Zoro muttered, scratching his head. "The path keeps moving..."

This was the *sixth* time down this particular path. Naruto gave Zoro a

bland look, because he certainly hadn't seen any of the pathways move. Which meant the only possible conclusion the young boy could come to:

"...You're lost, aren' you?"

Zoro's face flushed. "I'm not *lost*, brat!"

"You're tot'lly lost!" Naruto pointed accusingly at Zoro. "We're gonna die out here 'cause you f**kin' got us lost!" Naruto proceeded to collapse to the ground. "I never even got my first kiss..."

"Quit being dramatic!" Zoro conked Naruto on the head with a fist. "We *aren't* gonna die!"

Naruto glared at Zoro as he pulled out the map, trying to make sense of it. It really was confusing, and whoever drew it was an idiot. Zoro muttered this irritating fact laced with obscenities that widened the colorful side of Naruto's vocabulary.

"So...Zoro... where're we goin'?"

"Suna, if I can find it. I was lucky to find it the first time. It wasn't where it said it was on the map when I initially went through the desert."

"...You mean you *couldn't* find it. Ya got *lost*."

"Shut up, brat!"

Naruto stuck his tongue out at the teen.

Zoro was ready to throw the map away. "This thing is useless!"

"Can I see?"

Zoro scowled, and handed Naruto the map. Seriously, what did the kid expect to see that Zoro couldn't?

Naruto couldn't read that well, but he wasn't illiterate. He found Konoha, and since it didn't seem like Zoro could reliably tell which direction they had gone in, Naruto figured he had to look for landmarks in the area they were in and then find them on the map. A few of the characters written on the map Naruto wasn't sure of, so he just asked Zoro what they meant. From where they were sitting, he could see that there was a mountain close by, and it would probably take a day or two to reach it on foot. Naruto now muttered to himself

as he remembered that the sun traveled east-to-west, and within forty-five minutes, Naruto was scowling deeply as he realized that they had been heading *north/north-east* in varying circles; when in fact they wanted to be heading *west*.

In spite of his young age, within the span of an hour, Naruto had essentially been forced into becoming an expert in reading maps – well, sort of. Naruto could still get turned around himself and would then have to find out where they were on the map once again. Because Zoro didn't have a compass and Naruto was relying on landmarks of any kind along with being able to tell what direction they were going in by whatever position the sun was in, getting wherever they needed to go was a challenge. It was frustratingly becoming more than obvious that even *with* a map, Zoro *still* got lost. He also had quite a bit of responsibility in making sure that Zoro somehow didn't wander off, in spite of being told which direction to go. Hopefully, they could reach Suna without much incident.

Over the course of the next few days, Naruto had slowly began to fill out from having consistent meals, even if they were being rationed. Since he had gotten a bit stronger, Zoro figured he might as well start training the kid. Zoro smirked at Naruto's enthusiastic response at his mention of training him. Naruto was excited, that was good.

*o*o*o*

He was a monster! It was torture; pure, absolute *torture!* *How* could he have been excited for this so-called "training?" And people had called *him* a monster! Zoro was a f***king sadist, Naruto was sure of it.

At that moment, Naruto was positioned so that he stood atop two rocks that raised him a good four feet off the ground with his feet spread apart in a squatting position. He also had a stick clenched between his teeth that bore the weight of a rock the size of his head with thick ropes. Added to his misery was the fact Zoro had placed special weight Seals on his arms and legs that made his limbs feel extremely sluggish, even though it was an extra twenty pounds he was carrying, or so Zoro had claimed.

Naruto had to do squats and the poor boy actually had to argue his way down from 500 to 100. It was during this argument that Naruto was beginning to think that Fate had a twisted sense of humor when Zoro decided to take him in.

"I'm just a *kid*, ya know! I'm *eight*, Dattebayo!" Naruto had argued. "There's *no way* I could do that many squats or what'ver, *especi'lly* not while I have these weight Seals and have to lift a stupid rock!"

"Hmm...Really?" Zoro questioned lazily, but genuine surprise could be heard in his voice. "By the time I was eight, I was lifting boulders and doing upwards of 1,000 squats."

"1-1-1,000!" Naruto stared wide-eyed at Zoro, and pointed an accusing finger at him. "There's no way that's normal! You're some kinda monster, Dattebayo!"

"Get to training, brat."

"I'm tellin' you, I ain't doin' 500 squats!"

"...Fine, 499."

"THAT'S ONLY *ONE* LESS!"

*o*o*o* End Flashback *o*o*o*

Naruto's limbs felt as if they were on fire, and he collapsed onto the ground around his 48th squat. Zoro, who was currently swinging a large dumbbell big enough to crush an unfortunate opponent in quick, downward strikes. The moment the rock hit the ground, Zoro dropped the oversized weight which cracked the earth beneath it and ran to catch Naruto before his head could come into contact with the rock he had been lifting with his mouth.

Naruto was breathing heavily, and he lay on the ground looking up at the sky. Zoro came into his vision with a water flask in hand. "Here, drink."

Taking in greedy gulps, Naruto sighed as Zoro took the flask from him when he was finished drinking. Zoro didn't miss the look of disappointment and shame on Naruto's face.

"What's the matter, brat?"

"...I couldn't do 100 squats...I couldn't even do 50."

He had failed, and if that was the case...what if Zoro abandoned him because he hadn't been good enough?

Zoro smirked and ruffled Naruto's hair. "I didn't expect you to."

"Wha-?"

At Naruto's surprised expression, Zoro's smirk just widened. "I just wanted to see how much you could do; you actually did *more* than I expected. I put a weight Seal on the rock, so you actually were lifting an extra 30 pounds."

Naruto gaped.

"We'll keep you on this training regimen for a while until you're ready to advance. Good job, Naruto."

Ruffling his hair again, Zoro stood up. "Well, let's get cleaned up and set out again in half an hour."

Naruto watched as Zoro stood by his oversized weight and placed an unfurled a scroll next to it. Making a hand sign, the weight disappeared in puff of smoke. The teen moved to pack up all their things, and Naruto quickly stood up to help him. The boy grinned at Zoro in a way that made Zoro wonder what he said or did that made the kid so happy. Maybe it was the training?

Thankfully, there was a stream nearby where they could refill their flasks and scrub away any dirt.

Naruto of course, couldn't help but splash around. It was great being able to swim like this! He watched as Zoro was standing in waist-deep water scrubbing his shoulders. That was when Naruto noticed the various Seals Zoro had on his body. They covered his arms and even his shoulders. Naruto could tell from the symbols on his own weight Seal that Zoro had nearly five weight Seals on both arms, along with a few others he had on his person for whatever reason.

A thought came to Naruto, and with an evil glint in his eye, Naruto took a deep breath and dove under the water. A minute or two later, Zoro yelped when something bit his leg. Springing nearly a foot out of the water wearing only his boxers, Zoro quickly widened the distance between himself and whatever had bit him.

Looking down at his calf, Zoro's eyes narrowed when he saw a very Human-shaped bite mark on his leg with a small space in between the indents that indicated the loss of a tooth. Much like a certain blond brat did...

"Naruto!"

Naruto came up out of the water cackling like a banshee. Zoro growled and grabbed one of the water flasks and chucked it at Naruto's forehead. There was a pleased smirk on Zoro's face as the water flask struck true.

"Owww..."

Naruto rubbed the sore spot on his forehead, scowling. Geez, it was just a joke! The boy didn't have time to react when someone grabbed him and began grinding their knuckles into his head.

"I can't believe you actually *bit* me, you brat!"

Naruto struggled uselessly to pry himself from Zoro's grip, and he considered trying to bite Zoro again, or at least manage to kick him where it would hurt most in his struggle. Naruto grinned when a pained grunt sounded from Zoro, telling him that he must have succeeded. The younger boy didn't anticipate his limbs suddenly feeling nearly ten pounds heavier.

"Ah!" Naruto gasped when he felt the sudden weight plunge him under water. He wasn't underwater for long, because Zoro threw Naruto over his shoulder just seconds later, and trudged to the shore.

Not exactly rough but none-too-gently either, Zoro dropped Naruto to the ground. A minute or so later, Naruto's clothes were thrown onto his head. The water flask was also dropped onto his head.

"Get dressed, brat." Zoro's voice called out, ignoring Naruto's pouting glare as he rubbed the sore spots on his head. "Next town we go through we're getting you stuff that doesn't look like you got it from the "lost-for-a-reason-but-unfortunately-found" box."

Naruto reached for his clothes, but his arms felt like lead. He could hardly move!

"You *actually* made my weight Seals *heavier*?!"

"Think of it as payback for biting and kicking me."

Zoro smirked in amusement at Naruto's whine, and Naruto tried not to gauge what the teen could be thinking behind that smirk.

Zoro was thinking about how devious Naruto could be – he was

clearly much stronger than Zoro had given the younger boy credit for. Even if the brat was a little sh*t. If Naruto were to have his strength honed, he would be a force to be reckoned with. Maybe Naruto could be made into a half-decent swordsman someday.

*0*0*0*

The small village they stopped in didn't really have much to it; as it was mostly a stopping point for travelers. There was a group of merchants being accompanied by Iwanin passing through, so Zoro made do and ended up buying clothing for Naruto from them. The colors of the clothing were mostly muted, and there weren't really any clothing options for children, much less ones of Naruto's size, along with not being suited for what Naruto needed. Much of the items they had available for children varied in its consistency, which was annoying. One of the things Zoro did manage to find was a decent pair of open-toed shoes fairly similar to what Ninja wore; while they were a size too big, they were still adjustable and would last through miles of wear and tear.

After searching through what items they had available, Zoro finally found something suitable for his new ward. Naruto now wore a dark blue samue; although it was a little big on him. Even though it was small, it was meant for a small adult or a teenager, along with a pair of dark gray pants. Naruto stared down at his shoes in awe. He had always gotten used shoes from Konoha's donation bin; so for the next hour or so, the boy walked as if he were trying not to get his shoes even the slightest bit dirty. This new way of walking made him look like a strange, new-born-fawn-waddling-duck hybrid.

It was due to Naruto's wardrobe change that Zoro realized how utterly *blond* the kid was...of course, he wasn't any better with *green* hair. People would certainly be looking for them, and all they had to say was, 'We're looking for a kid with green hair. Seen anyone like that?'

While he had seen a few people with green hair, they were few and far between enough that he would stand out. So next up, Zoro decided that they should dye their hair, at least until they left the Elemental Nations. Kakashi would be proud. Zoro grimaced inwardly at the thought of Kakashi. Instead of worrying about whether or not his friend was still alive (because that flea-bag better be okay) Zoro forced himself to focus on the matter at hand. Procuring some hair dye was easy enough, and Naruto's blond locks were now an odd bronze color and Zoro's was now dark brown. They looked different enough that

no-one would look at them twice.

A second thought that suddenly occurred to the teen was that those same people would ask something else that could help identify them if 'green hair' didn't help narrow down the search.

'Did you see anyone with three swords?'

While Zoro had heard stories about a guy residing in Kumo who wielded *eight* swords – someone Zoro would more than love to have a sparring match against; but three swords was enough of an oddity. Considering he had Naruto, he probably wanted to stand out as little as possible. That meant that the next stop on Zoro's list was looking at what weapons the merchants had for sale. Wado Ichimonji of course remained by his side, but Zoro traded his two other blades for a short sword for Naruto. This meant that he saved money, and also took away a second major identifier for both him and Naruto. The sword had a red handle and was a little longer than the young boy's arm. It was decent enough that it most definitely wouldn't break if Naruto ended up having to cross blades with an opponent.

Upon receiving the sword and the supplies to care for it, Naruto silently stared at it in wide-eyed wonder. His gaze lifted from the sword up to Zoro who was saying, "Now, take care of that sword, you hear? I'm not gonna waste time and money on someone who treats their weapons like – oi!"

Zoro was cut off when Naruto enveloped him in a hug that was surprisingly strong for a boy his age. Zoro of course, was not one who was used to physical contact, much less being tackled so willingly by children. He unwittingly shuddered when Naruto met his gaze, and the younger boy's eyes were filled with tears.

"Thank you, Zoro."

Feeling awkward and uncomfortable, Zoro simply huffed and ruffled Naruto's hair. "Yeah, yeah, brat... Just take care of that sword, got it?"

"Okay!"

*O*O*

Meanwhile, in Konoha...

Danzo was not happy. He had plans in place for every contingency; and he had plans for when those plans failed. But of course, none of

those plans took into account some no-name brat from a civilian village showing up and taking the Jinchuuriki with him. According to his sources, none of them could find Roronoa Zoro anywhere. Danzo had calculated that the Uchiha Clan was no longer a necessity to Konoha and was going to become a threat due to their numbers, and thus was in the early stages of planning their demise.

Having the Jinchuuriki would have kept the balance of powers within the village – but now, the Jinchuuriki was gone. That meant that the Uchiha would have to stay; otherwise, Konoha would be thrown to the wolves. Danzo knew from his sources that Fugaku was planning a coup, and the Jinchuuriki was a part of that plan. But because the Jinchuuriki was gone – it effectively forced both the plans of the coup d'etat and the slaughter of the traitorous Uchiha to be put on hold. While Danzo didn't like keeping the Uchiha around, it was for now, an annoying necessity. So he would sit back, and keep an eye on the Clan Heads and wait for his moment to strike.

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Mizuki was not happy. In fact, to help him quell his rage, he was throwing a couple of oversized shuriken at various targets and was missing more than he was hitting. His plans had relied on the little Demon to eventually attend the Ninja Academy where he would systematically interfere with the Demon's training. He would have acted like that monster's friend, and would have assigned a "test" where the monster would steal a very special scroll from the Hokage Tower. But alas, some freakish outsider brat came along and ruined everything!

The man furiously threw another oversized shuriken and missed his target entirely. It missed the tree by more than five feet and embedded itself in the far wall of his bedroom. Of course, for that to have happened, his weapon had to crash through his window, shattering glass and other debris everywhere it wasn't supposed to be...onto his bed and all over his floor.

Mizuki let out a string of curses that would have done any sailor worth their salt proud. The man truly believed that any and all the troubles befalling him at that moment were the fault of that stupid Demon and that no-name-wannabe-swordsman-bounty hunter. Grumbling about the unfairness of life under his breath, Mizuki went to clean up the mess. He just *knew* that Roronoa guy was trouble! It didn't matter to him that Kotetsu and Izumo both liked Roronoa and thought that he was "pretty cool" as they had put it.

Mizuki had been right; although he would have liked to gloat, it wasn't like it mattered now.

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The Hokage did not look happy. Sarutobi felt every bit his age at that moment, and he was exhausted. He had been listening to Koharu, Homura, and Danzo all criticize him for his decision regarding letting get Roronoa involved with Naruto, even if it had been for a few minutes; which had clearly been the odd, green-haired teen's plan all along. But it didn't make sense.

Roronoa had never expressed any visible interest in Naruto, nor had he ever sought the boy out. The only interaction (if it could even be called that) the two had before that day had been a little over a year ago when Roronoa was an unwitting victim in one of Naruto's pranks. The teen had been irritated, but made no move against anyone that was present. He always kept to himself, never really talking with anyone. It had taken some gentle pushing, but Roronoa had opened up to Sarutobi if only a little. Roronoa had been seen talking with Gin earlier that night, a traveling book salesman who came through Konoha at random intervals – and ANBU and the Uchiha police would be talking with him soon.

Members of the ANBU and various members of Konoha's tracking clans stood before Sarutobi as they gathered on the roof of the Hokage tower. All-in-all, there were five teams of various Shinobi who would be sent out. Sarutobi took a deep breath and began:

"Thank you for coming everyone. Roughly two hours ago, a young man known as Roronoa Zoro effectively disappeared with one Uzumaki Naruto." As a few people in front of him who were not aware of the situation either balked or stiffened only in the slightest of ways, Sarutobi continued, "I know you are all aware of what this means."

"How did this happen?" a member of the ANBU asked.

"From what Monkey reported, it happened during a crowd control incident while he and Dog were escorting Roronoa back to Seiko Inn."

"This Roronoa kid got away from both Monkey *and* Dog?" An incredulous Inoichi asked.

"He managed to slip away from Dog's clone." Sarutobi responded.
"We're still trying to figure out how he did it."

"He apparently has some sort of possible teleportation Jutsu from what we can tell." Tsume spoke up only after getting a slight nod in permission from Sarutobi. The expressions on her fellow Shinobi showed just how dire the situation was, along with how irritated she was with the whole thing. "It's consistent from what Dog has reported, and what we tracking teams have figured out on our own."

The Shinobi who read the report detailing what Konoha knew of Roronoa didn't like what they saw. A no-name kid who was a fairly skilled bounty hunter with an unknown Jutsu or worse and more than likely, an unknown Kekkei Genkai had slipped passed two very skilled ANBU Shinobi along with the village sentries.

"This is to be treated as an S-Class retrieval mission. Do not engage with any Shinobi from the other villages unless it is absolutely necessary. Do not let anyone outside of Konoha know that the Jinchuuriki is missing. If Roronoa gets outside of Hi no Kuni...I'm afraid we will have to cease the retrieval of Naruto. We cannot and will not incite any international incidents. You all have been assigned your sectors. Time is of the essence. *GO!*"

"HA-!"

As the Shinobi teams spread out, Sarutobi decided that he would contact one other Shinobi who would have a chance of finding out where Roronoa and Naruto went. It was time he got into contact with Jiraiya.

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Uchiha Fugaku was not happy. That Roronoa brat had in less than a day, ruined years of planning on his part. He and the elders of his clan had been in the midst of planning a coup, and one Uzumaki Naruto played an integral part in his plan – or rather, the beast that was sealed within him. There was no way they could have their uprising now, what with the Kyuubi *no longer being in the village!*

Fugaku couldn't help himself as he punched a training dummy, eyes flashing red. The training dummy splintered upon contact with his fist. Taking deep breaths, Fugaku attempted to calm down, but it wasn't working.

"...Father?"

Fugaku turned to look at Itachi.

"Itachi. Call the elders in for a meeting. You're attending as well. We need to discuss the events that happened tonight."

"Events?" Itachi asked carefully.

"The Kyuubi's host has been taken."

Itachi couldn't hide the surprise in his voice when he asked, "Taken? By who?"

"Some civilian kenjustu user named Roronoa Zoro. He showed up, and now both he and the host of the Kyuubi are gone. Our revolution will have to wait."

"...I see." Itachi simply said. "I will go fetch the clan elders now."

It was only when Itachi was alone, away from prying eyes that he let out a sigh of relief. He would not have to do the unthinkable. Itachi silently thanked the mysterious swordsman for delaying his father's plans. In truth, Itachi was a pacifist. He personally would have preferred working anywhere else but in the field. But he had been born with an insurmountable genius that made him the perfect tool for everything that the life of a Shinobi entailed.

It was at the clan meeting just barely an hour later that Itachi stared in shock at his father. Making sure he heard his father right, the teen asked, "You want us to *what?*"

"We need you and Shisui to hunt Roronoa Zoro down, dispose of him, and bring back the Kyuubi – unharmed, before the others have a chance of tracking them down. Only then will our plans succeed. So you two are going to volunteer in the search for the Jinchuuriki."

His father and the elders apparently were still set on their uprising, but it would only work if they had the Kyuubi. Itachi and Shisui both shared a glance, and it was clear to both of them that neither liked this plan. But they did not argue with Fugaku or the clan elders.

"Understood," both Itachi and Shisui responded simultaneously.

As Itachi and Shisui set out with the other Shinobi search teams barely an hour later, Shisui found himself looking up at the moon and sighing heavily. He ran a hand through his messy black locks. "What are we going to do, Itachi?"

"Whatever we have to."

The pair set out at a steady run, towards one of the smaller towns some miles away from Konoha. They were one of the teams heading south. Itachi and Shisui prepared themselves to create clones for if and when they reached the border for the Land of Tea. There were a few more members of their Clan present that could ensure that no-one else would be missing them through the quick and simple use of the Sharingan.

"Which is?"

Itachi was silent for a moment or two before responding, "To ensure the safety of Konoha and survival of the Uchiha Clan by any means necessary."

Shisui looked at Itachi thoughtfully before saying, "...I agree. Whatever it takes."

*0*0*

Roughly two months had already gone by since Naruto had left Konoha with Zoro, and in that short amount of time, Naruto's skills with a sword had (quite forcibly) improved. While Zoro had held back (or so he claimed) he tended to be fairly ruthless in various aspects of his training and as a result Naruto had learned to evade, block and strike much faster than a person would have under normal circumstances. If Naruto wanted to avoid getting a nasty bruise or cut, he had to fight smart. Of course, he and Zoro both had been impressed at Naruto's rapid healing abilities when Naruto got a cut on his arm. Of course, that discovery unfortunately brought forth a problem for Naruto:

"We *aren'* gonna test my healin' abil'ties like that, Dattebayo!"

Naruto yelled as he unwittingly (most likely instinctively) climbed a tree to get away from Zoro using nothing more than chakra on the bottoms of his feet.

Zoro actually had the nerve to *pout* at him as the teen held his beloved sword. "Why not, brat? It'd be good to see what you can walk away from. Pushing the limits of your body is the true test of a warrior."

"Cause I might not walk away at all!" Naruto was second-guessing his idea for running up a tree. Dammit, he had just cornered himself!

"Fine, we'll do it later."

"I'd rather not! I'm not a monster like you!"

With a sigh, Zoro replied, "Alright, we'll compromise. What if it was just a finger?"

"Like hell!" Naruto gave Zoro a finger alright.

"If your cuts heal, it might grow back."

"It might *not*!" Naruto didn't like that he had better reasoning skills than a guy nine years older than he was.

Zoro snorted and turned his back on Naruto, muttering, "Spoilsport..."

The teen didn't push for amputating limbs or any other extremities after that one talk, and the demanding training regimen continued as it was.

By this time, Zoro judged Naruto's skills with a sword to be a few grades above that of a common thief who was average at best with a sword – of course, he couldn't know for sure until Naruto faced a real opponent. But Zoro wasn't willing to throw Naruto into the midst of things without being sure that he could properly defend himself. After all, he had promised Kakashi to take care of the brat. Plus, there was the fact that the kid was *eight*, and hadn't even been in a real fight. He wanted the kid to be ready and willing to take a life if and when it was necessary. Zoro had killed someone for the first time when he was fourteen – it had been purely out of self-defense, but it still was a moment that changed him. For better or for worse, depending on who you asked.

Somewhere deep inside, Zoro would have to admit that there was an insatiable bloodlust that reveled in fighting and striving to find stronger opponents so he could cut them down. He knew that he scared people, but he didn't care. He only targeted the strong ones and those that preyed on the weak and defenseless. Zoro had a swordsman's promise to keep after all, and he'd be damned if he didn't keep that promise.

*0*0*

Outside of a family-run inn and restaurant in a small village that very nearly bordered Kawa no Kuni and Hi no Kuni, it was by pure providence that Zoro and Naruto struck up conversation with a random group of traveling merchants who wanted to go to Suna and needed escorts. Their leader had been on his way to send a message to

Konoha for an escort mission when an inquisitive Naruto unwittingly intercepted him asking why his clothes were so flashy.

The merchant, Soran, whose clothing was certainly flashy by the locals' standards, had been humored by Naruto's childish curiosity.

"You aren't here by yourself, are you?" Soran asked, glancing around for the boy's guardian.

"I'm with my brother, Dattebayo!" Naruto indicated said brother before Zoro even had a chance to respond by running over and grabbing the teen's arm.

Zoro again, was unsure of how to exactly respond to Naruto's odd behavior towards him. He wasn't annoyed; just to a certain extent, confused. But Zoro found that he didn't mind Naruto calling him such. Well, now that he thought about it, it would make more sense if they told people they were brothers. There probably weren't very many seventeen-year-olds with apprentices in swordsmanship. Simply saying that they were family made things less complicated.

"Hey, brat." Zoro ruffled Naruto's hair.

Soran smiled at the pair. He didn't think that the two boys looked very much alike – and judging by their appearance, he figured that they were a couple of war orphans. The older boy must have stepped up when they lost everything and everyone. That was quite a bit of admirable responsibility on the teen's part.

"I see. Where are you two headed?"

"Sunagakure." Zoro answered.

"What a coincidence!" Soran said with a smile. "We're headed there as well! Of course, we'll be going in a few days after I send the request to Konoha for escort."

"You're going to Suna?" Naruto asked.

"You need escorts?" Zoro grinned.

Soran sweat-dropped when both Zoro and Naruto looked at him with glinting eyes.

"Say, Flashy-jii-san," Naruto looked up at the man. "Ya'know how to get to Suna, right?"

"...Yes? Uh, yes, I do." Soran replied, as the younger boy cheered.

Naruto was overjoyed with finding someone who knew how to get to Suna! If they could travel with the merchants, then all he would have to do was make sure Zoro stuck with them – he wouldn't have to navigate *and* keep an eye on Zoro!

Naruto put his hands together in a pleading gesture. "Can we travel with you?"

"Well, uh..." Soran started, but Zoro stepped up now.

"We could be your escorts – our swords aren't for playing around, you know." Zoro grinned.

Soran nervously glanced between Naruto's pleading gaze that made him feel guilty; and Zoro's malicious grin that sent shivers down his spine.

"It'd save you time and money," Zoro reasoned. "Plus, we don't need money – just give us food for our services in escorting you to Suna. I'm searching for someone, so we don't have time to dawdle."

"I-I'll go speak with the others..."

Soran quickly turned and went to speak with his comrades. It was far cheaper to use Konoha-Nin than Suna-Nin; but if they (mostly him) didn't have to spend money on escorts, all the better. There was also the phrase of "time is money" that drove Soran's reasoning as well. It was only ten minutes later when Soran came back; the smile on his face was pretty much an affirmation of what Zoro and Naruto wanted to hear. Since both sides had something the other wanted, they came to an easily-made agreement. As the saying went, "never look a gift-horse in the mouth."

"What are your names, by the way?" Soran asked, realizing at that moment he hadn't asked the odd boys' names.

Just in case someone came along looking for them and ran into these merchants, and began asking questions, Zoro figured that he should use an alias. After a few seconds passed, Zoro answered with, "Zolo."

Glancing at Zoro curiously, but following his lead, Naruto replied with, "Uuhhh...Maki."

"Nice to meet both of you, I'm Soran; the unofficial leader of our little

group."

Including Soran, it was a group of five people; three men and two women.

One of the women who looked to be in her early twenties eyed Zoro and subtly whispered to her female comrade, "He's kinda cute, don't you think?"

One rotund man gave the teen and the small boy a cynical look. "You didn't say that they were *kids*, Soran. They don't even have headbands. Are you *sure* they can be relied on to protect us?"

"Oh, I hope someone *does* attack us." Zoro grinned as he placed a hand on Naruto's head. "That'll give my little brother here some practice."

Zoro laughed as if he told some incredibly funny joke, and Naruto only gave his foxiest of grins. The merchants all (save one) sweat-dropped, now wondering who the hell Soran had hired to escort them. On the bright side, have someone like "Zolo" on *their* side could very well work in their favor. The kid's smirk would more than likely scare off any potential attackers.

The young woman approached Zoro and flicked her long, blond hair. "Hello, I'm Kari," she practically purred. "Let me know if you need anything, and I mean *anything*."

"You wouldn't happen to have any sake, would you?" Zoro asked, completely oblivious to Kari's flirting.

*0*0*0*

According to Soran, it would take them about a week to reach Suna; five, depending on how many breaks they took and how long. The journey was made fairly easily, and as rocks and sand slowly began to replace grass and trees, the temperature of course, steadily rose. Everyone ended up having to wear a head-covering to prevent getting sunburn. Of course, there were a few of the merchants who had their doubts about Naruto's capability; he was a *child*. But as they traveled, the merchants were exposed to Zoro's crazy training regimen that made them wonder if the teen was even Human; because he certainly didn't act like a Ninja. As for Naruto, they learned simply through observation that perhaps they had underestimated the boy. He was clearly much faster and stronger than they initially assumed. It seemed that the rule that applied to Ninja also extended to sword-wielding children; for only a fool would think that a child was weak

and harmless.

So here they were – sitting around a campfire one last time before reaching Suna sometime in the late afternoon of the next day. The merchants didn't know what to make of Zoro or Naruto. They had never seen someone lift giant weights before, and Zoro's unnatural strength had helped them out more than once during their trip. Items that three men struggled to even lift off of the ground was easily lifted by Zoro and thrown over his shoulder.

Kari had given up on flirting with "Zolo" within the first hours of their trip. The boy was denser than a wall, and unwittingly insulting. When she had tried to show off a bit of shoulder, "Zolo" had nothing more than a comment about her wardrobe "malfunction".

"You should be careful, you don't want to get sunburn..." he had said. So caring! But then he followed that comment with, "Maybe you should gain some weight so that your clothes don't come off accidentally."

When she had tried to flip her hair, a move that often got men's attention, "Zolo" had offered to cut it with his sword (that was scary!) because it was apparently getting in her way. When she tried to walk next to him, "Zolo" always had to move somewhere else because "Maki" would suddenly come and interrupt. Unbeknownst to her, it was because Zoro was straying off the path, and Kari had been too busy hungrily eyeing Zoro from wherever she was to even notice. When she tried to sit next to him on their break, "Maki" would plant himself next to "Zolo" and chatter away. Children were very effective mood-killers and relationship-deterrents for Kari, even if they were siblings.

With a sigh and still miffed about that weight comment, Kari gave in to the fact that she would be sleeping alone for the remainder of their trip. But she silently observed as their escorts trained. She could at least, appreciate *looking*.

Naruto was currently practicing quick thrusts with his sword while Zoro kept watch. Occasionally, he had a comment or two about Naruto's stance. By now, the merchants had gone to bed, lulled to sleep simply from listening to their escorts train. After going through a few more katas, Naruto settled down next to Zoro. Glancing behind them, Naruto could hear five different levels of snoring, so he turned back to Zoro.

"Ne, Zoro?"

"Hm?"

"Why's Wado Ichimonji so important to you?"

Zoro glanced over and Naruto's expectant face. Zoro just glanced up at the star-filled sky for a moment before simply replying, "I made a promise with a friend a long time ago...this sword carries the weight of our promise."

"...What was the promise?"

"To be the best swordsman in the world."

Naruto grinned excitedly. "Really? That's so cool!"

The boy winced somewhat when one of the men behind them muttered incoherently then shifted in his sleep.

Naruto settled back, gazing at the stars. "You can do it, Zoro-nii. You can become the bestest swordsman ever!"

There was more muttering behind them, but the merchants didn't wake up.

"Someday, I will be."

Even though Naruto had yet to see Zoro in a real fight, he believed that Zoro could never lose. He was *much* too cool for that!

"I'm glad I'm traveling with you, Zoro-nii."

"Get some sleep, brat."

Zoro ruffled Naruto's hair, his amused grin hidden in the shadows of his head-wear. Of all the little kids he could possibly get stuck with, Zoro found that he didn't really mind Naruto.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, people in this chapter really have anger issues.

Samue (作務衣) is the work clothing of Japanese Zen Buddhist monks, worn when engaged in samu, (作務) which refers to physical work that is done with mindfulness as a simple, practical and spiritual practice. Samu might include activities such as

cleaning, cooking, gardening, or chopping wood.

Next up, we get to meet Gaara! Yay~!

The Impenetrable Shield Crumbles and Zoro's Vow

Chapter Summary

Zoro and Naruto meet Gaara, and Yashamaru realizes what Naruto is. Yashamaru has an important and difficult decision to make.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for the kudos <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Chapter Three: The Impenetrable Shield Crumbles and Zoro's Vow

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"I'm glad I'm traveling with you, Zoro-nii."

"Get some sleep, brat."

Zoro ruffled Naruto's hair, his amused grin hidden in the shadows of his head wrap. Of all the little kids he could possibly get stuck with, Zoro found that he didn't really mind Naruto.

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In all honesty, Suna wasn't much to look at. The buildings were made out of stone, and pretty much blended into the environment. Anyone else would have appreciated the simple yet amazing beauty of the early evening sun reflecting off of the desert sands and the way the buildings almost glowed like soft torchlight. But Zoro wasn't like the average person, and for him to admire any scenery whatsoever, it would have to be pretty damn impressive.

One of the sentries recognized Zoro, and easily waved him and Naruto through, although the various Suna ANBU patrolling the village kept an eye on them from a distance. The reason for Naruto not having any kind of ID wasn't really questioned; after all, there were numerous orphans throughout the Elemental Nations. Naruto clearly wasn't a Ninja, and Zoro randomly taking in a stray apparently wasn't all that surprising; it seemed that many people did that sort of thing.

Naruto looked at everything in with wide-eyed fascination. The people here wore duller colors and form-fitting-yet-still-loose clothes. They also had much harsher expressions.

Saying goodbye to the merchants, Zoro and Naruto had to wait for a few minutes for an ANBU to come escort them to the Kazekage's office. A woman appeared in a puff of smoke, and she only nodded to the guards.

"Puma, please escort Roronoa and the kid to see the Kazekage."

'Puma' only nodded, and simply motioned with her hand indicating that Zoro should follow. Naruto kept a tight grip on Zoro's shirt, making sure that he didn't wander. Naruto grumbled when he kicked up sand and some of it got in his shoe.

As they neared the Kazekage's tower, Naruto began to feel an odd sort of pull in his gut. It didn't hurt, slightly tingled; sort of like a pins-and-needles feeling. It was a sensation he had never felt before, and he wasn't sure if he should be worried about it or not. Should he say something to Zoro? But before Naruto could voice any sort of concern, they stopped outside of the tower.

"Stay out here." Zoro instructed. He pointed at a bench outside of the building. "Look, a nice bench where you can take a nap."

"Huh? But why?" Naruto asked with a borderline whine.

"Because I said so, brat." Zoro replied, crossing his arms and scowling.

Naruto answered back with his own scowl, before plopping down on the bench and crossing his arms with a huff.

In all honesty, Zoro didn't like Rasa. It was one thing to ask questions about Naruto, it was another to talk to him. There were aspects of Rasa's attitude that made Zoro wary. It was another one of those things that he couldn't really put his finger on. He and Rasa got along well-enough, but it was more out of mutual agreement than actual friendliness.

Puma took hold of Zoro's arm, mostly because Suna-nin were more cautious of outsiders than their Konoha counterparts. Zoro had been very lucky during his first visit to Suna, and hadn't gotten lost anywhere that would have warranted a kunai to the back. Zoro simply walked with Puma, not saying anything else.

Naruto continued pouting and muttering to himself about the unfairness of it all, expertly glaring at his shoes. The sand felt coarse and irritating in his shoes. He decided that he hated sand, and only stopped in his mutterings when he felt eyes on him. Glancing up, Naruto saw a boy around his age watching him warily from the side of a building across the road from the office. The boy had red hair and panda-eyes, and clung tightly to a large, old-looking teddy bear. For some reason he couldn't name, Naruto felt compelled to approach the other boy.

Naruto grinned at the other boy. "Hi!"

The odd boy flinched somewhat, and then looked behind himself as if he were making sure that no-one was behind him. Looking back to Naruto, he asked quietly, "A-are...are y-you talking to me?"

"O'course, I am!" Naruto briefly glanced at the entrance to the Kazekage tower before getting up and jogging towards the only interesting person he had seen since arriving in Suna. Again, the odd boy flinched back slightly when Naruto had gotten within three feet of him. Naruto frowned. "Why're you so jumpy? I just wanna talk."

The other boy wouldn't look at him, and only shrugged weakly. Looking up at Naruto, he asked, "You want to talk to me?"

"Well, yeah, I'm doin' it right now, aren't I? I'm Naruto. What's your name?"

"Gaara."

"Nice to meet you, Gaara!" Naruto said with his soon to be classic foxy grin. "I'm here with my brother, Zoro. He's turning in a few bounties. Zoro-nii's a swordsman, and he's *awesome!* Well, I've never actually *seen* him really fight yet to be honest. But he's *really* cool, Dattebayo!"

Gaara stared at Naruto almost incredulously, because no-one ever had spoken to him so willingly – well, there was his uncle, Yashamaru. But he was family, so perhaps there was a requirement of some kind. Well...that didn't really explain his father. Perhaps there was some kind of exception?

"What's it like living in the desert?" Naruto asked.

"...I don't know?" Gaara answered uncertainly, as he fiddled with one of the bear's worn ears. "I've never lived anywhere else, so I don't know what living anywhere else is like."

"Makes sense." Naruto grinned again. "Do you wanna play a game? You've gotta have some kinda game."

Gaara couldn't help but question why this stranger wanted to play him, but since Naruto was the only other child willing to do so, he wouldn't complain. So he only nodded, and said, "I'll be right back."

Gaara quickly ran a few houses down and came back with a red ball in his hands in place of the bear a few minutes later. He hesitantly held it out to Naruto. "Um, the other village children play ball, or something. I haven't played much, so I'm not very good."

"That's alright!" Naruto said. "We can play while we wait for my brother."

The little game started simple enough, with Gaara and Naruto kicking the ball back and forth to each other. Oblivious to the wary stares of the adults who were heading home for the day, the game started to heat up due to Naruto's competitive streak. With a shout of effort, Naruto kicked the ball as hard as he could. Gaara wasn't prepared to catch the ball at the speed it was careening towards him. The ball hurtled towards Gaara's face, but just before it could make contact which would very likely result in a broken nose, a wall of sand shot up in front of Gaara and stopped the ball.

Naruto gaped. "How did you...?"

"I...it's..." Gaara started, feeling slight panic beginning to build. This was what always terrified the other children. Naruto wouldn't want to...

"That's amazing, Dattebayo! How did you do that? Does it happen all the time?"

"Y-yeah...I can't help it..." Gaara mumbled.

"Cool. Okay." Naruto said simply. He picked up the ball again and threw it at an unsuspecting Gaara. The wall of sand shot up again, and Naruto smirked. "That's kinda cool."

Gaara couldn't help but scowl at Naruto, but he wasn't angry. No-one had ever called his shield "cool," before. It was just more in mild

irritation. It was an odd thing for Gaara, who did not fully understand Naruto.

"Let's keep going!"

Naruto and Gaara resumed their positions, and continued hitting the ball back and forth. The ball sailed between them a few more times, before a powerful kick from Naruto caused the ball to overshoot Gaara, who quickly moved to catch it. Gaara reached out for the ball, his sand responding to his unwitting will. His sand wrapped around the ball and effectively crushed it. A muffled **POP!** sounded from Gaara's sand.

As the sand fell away, Gaara stared at the popped ball, and guiltily glanced over at Naruto who was staring at the now useless ball.

"I'm sorry, I couldn't..." Gaara started, but he stopped when Naruto started laughing.

"You popped it!" Naruto said through his laughter. "Jus' like a pimple!"

Gaara stared wide-eyed at Naruto, completely perplexed. The other boy *still* wasn't scared of him...

"Naruto." Another voice interrupted Naruto's laughter.

The two boys turned to Zoro, who had an irritated scowl on his face.

"Zoro-nii, this is Gaara!" Naruto happily introduced. "He has this awesome sand shield thing, it's pretty cool, Dattēbayo!" Turning back to Gaara, Naruto continued, "This is Zoro, my brother. You should show him that sand thing you just did. You should also see him lift his weights. They can *crack* the *ground*, ya'know."

Gaara uneasily glanced up at Zoro, who still had that scowl on his face. Maybe Zoro didn't like that he had been playing with Naruto... Gaara shifted uneasily.

"Come here, both of you." Zoro jerked his head in the indicated direction, and led them over to an inconspicuous spot in between two of the buildings.

Zoro squatted down so that he was eye-level with Gaara. "So you're Gaara, huh?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Your old man told me about you." Zoro didn't look happy about what he had heard. "Kid, has anyone ever come after you before? Like trying to kill you?"

Gaara immediately looked uncomfortable. But he finally responded after a few silent moments. "Ten times over the last four years... But my sand has always protected me...why?"

Zoro's frown deepened. "He hired me to kill you."

Gaara's eyes widened in fear, and he took a step back while Naruto grabbed Zoro's shirt. "Zoro, you can't! He's my friend!"

"I didn't say that I was *going* to, brat." Zoro said, giving Naruto a light flick on the forehead with a finger. "Gaara, listen. You shouldn't stay here. Even if this sand shield thing you have protects you, you shouldn't have to deal with attacks and f**king idiots getting themselves killed. You're the one who has to live with the result of their idiocy."

"Father wouldn't do that..." Gaara started, but couldn't finish because he started hyperventilating. Zoro reached out, but a wall of sand stopped him before he even got within inches of Gaara. "He wouldn't..."

Zoro blinked. No way... Gaara had that same dark energy Naruto did, but it felt much more chaotic. Sort of like it was less contained. Well, that certainly explained things, but it didn't excuse Rasa being an a**hole.

"Calm down and breathe, Gaara." Zoro slowly pulled away, not wanting Gaara to have a crazy reaction of some kind to physical contact.

"Gaara, it's alright!" Naruto whispered harshly.

He didn't really understand it himself, but something kept drawing him to the other boy. Naruto could feel an almost unhinged sort of energy radiating from Gaara. Plus, there was the fact that he already considered Gaara a friend.

"Calm down, raccoon-brat. No one's going to hurt you." Zoro brusquely stated. "We're just talking, got it?"

Perhaps it was because no-one had ever called him 'raccoon-brat', Gaara slowly came back to his senses as the sand fell away. Although

he had to wonder at the name 'raccoon-brat', Gaara looked as if the entire misery of the Elemental Nations had befallen him. Not saying a word, Gaara looked up at Zoro. Zoro's scowl wasn't as prominent now.

"Look, how about you come with us?" Zoro suggested somewhat awkwardly after a moment. "I'll understand if you don't want to, but a brat like yourself shouldn't have to live in a place where their own parent puts a target on their backs."

Naruto beamed up at Zoro, then turned to Gaara. "You should come with us. It'll be great; you won't have to put up with all this stupid sand." Naruto then paused for a moment when he remembered Gaara's *sand* shield. "Or at least, you'll be able to see trees, grass and stuff like that."

"But why?" Gaara looked up at Zoro. The boy didn't, *couldn't* believe Zoro. "Why would father do that?"

Again, Zoro wished for some kind of alcohol to go along with the course of this conversation. He didn't want to tell Gaara what his old man really thought of him. Damn these Shinobi!

"Well...you're like a sheathed sword, except it doesn't stay sheathed like it should..." Zoro stumbled through his explanation. Talking to Naruto had been easier. Meanwhile, Naruto began glancing from Zoro to Gaara, remembering having a conversation very similar to the one they were having with Gaara. "I mean...I personally think the sheath is safe, but your old man doesn't..."

Gaara furrowed invisible eyebrows, not really understanding what Zoro was trying to say.

"Do you have a monster in you too?" Naruto suddenly asked in a low whisper.

Winced at Naruto's question, Gaara hesitated before answering, "I-I don't know? People...people usually say that I'm the monster-"

"You're not a monster." Zoro said quickly. Ugh, he rubbed the back of his head, messing up his headwear in the process. Re-adjusting his headwear, Zoro sighed. "Look...we aren't sticking around here for long; we've gotta keep moving, but if you want to come with us, we'll be waiting outside the South Gate until *one o'clock* tonight."

Zoro pointed west, or at least the direction he *thought* south was in. Naruto hit Zoro's shoulder.

"Zoro-nii, that's *north-west!* South is *that way!*" Turning to Gaara, Naruto grinned. "We'll be waiting at the *South* Gate. Please come with us!" Naruto paused briefly for a moment before continuing, "I'm just like you, ya'know...I have a monster in me, too...but Zoro-nii saved me, and he'll save you too."

"I...I don't know..." Gaara wouldn't look at either of them. He had felt something he couldn't explain when he first saw Naruto; like he was drawn to him. Well...the quivering feeling in his stomach seemed anxious, and it was making him feel nauseous. It was like whatever was in him wanted to get out and wreak havoc, or something. "I..."

"Oh, Gaara, there you are." Gaara's uncle, Yashamaru suddenly appeared in the alleyway. He smiled at Zoro and Naruto. "I'm sorry to interrupt your game, but Gaara has to come home now. It's nearly dinnertime." Yashamaru motioned to his nephew. "Come along, Gaara."

Gaara slowly trudged towards his uncle about as enthusiastically as someone getting ready for a root canal.

"Thank you for taking care of my nephew."

"We'll see you later, won't we, Gaara?" Naruto called out hopefully.

While Gaara wouldn't look at him, Yashamaru smiled back at the pair and said, "We'll see."

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The only choices Zoro and Naruto had for dinner was a small, hole-in-the-wall restaurant, and Naruto was only disappointed because they didn't serve ramen. He'd have to be satisfied with the broth-and-potatoes stew. Zoro stuck with a simple fried rice dish, and he was able to get his sake fix as well.

Naruto ate his food slowly, and looked up at Zoro. "He'll come with us, right?"

Zoro shrugged. "Who knows."

Zoro frowned as he thought about his earlier conversation with Rasa.

****Flashback****

Puma took hold of Zoro's arm, mostly because Suna-nin were more

cautious of outsiders than their Konoha counterparts. Zoro had been very lucky during his first visit to Suna, and hadn't gotten lost anywhere that would have warranted a kunai to the back. Zoro simply walked with Puma, not saying anything else.

Puma led Zoro up a flight of stairs, passed a few rooms with closed doors, up another flight of stairs, and then they entered into a large, circular office where the Kazekage, Rasa was standing with his back to them, looking out one of the windows. Puma released Zoro's arm, and obediently went to stand off to the side. Rasa, in full Kazekage uniform minus his hat turned slightly to face Zoro.

"Roronoa, it's been a while."

"Kazekage." Zoro gave a quick, last-minute bow, remembering his manners.

Turning back to look out the window, Rasa asked, "...So, which of my wayward Shinobi did you bring me?"

"I got three of 'em."

Zoro quickly pulled out a scroll and released the Seal. Three bodies appeared in a **POOF** of smoke, and that was only when Rasa turned to look at them. He frowned slightly as he studied their features. Yes, he recognized them; Kuri, Kana, and Reiji. They had been teammates, and all three were skilled in kenjutsu, which was a rarity in Suna. Suna-Shinobi were usually known for their highly potent poisons and puppets.

Sealing the bodies away once again, Zoro then placed the scroll on Rasa's desk. After handing Zoro his payment (which wasn't much, but it would have to do) Rasa glanced outside again, and then frowned. "Who is that boy talking with Gaara?"

Zoro looked outside, and saw that Naruto was enthusiastically talking to another boy with dark red hair.

"That's Naruto. I ended up with the brat." Smirking, Zoro added, "He's a little sh*t at times, but he's showing some promising skill as a kenjutsu user."

"So young and you've already got an apprentice?"

Zoro ignored the 'so young' comment, but he *did* glare. And pouted, only a bit.

"As the boy's guardian, don't you think it's your responsibility to warn him against playing with monsters?"

"Huh? What do you mean, 'monsters?' *What* monsters?"

Rasa simply gave a nod of his head, and Zoro watched as Naruto and the boy whose name he had to guess was 'Gaara' began a game of some kind where they simply kicked a ball back and forth. There didn't seem to be any kind of rules to their game, other than trying to get the ball past each other.

"What monster? All I see is that red-hair kid..." Zoro's voice trailed off and his brows furrowed. "Why's he a monster?"

Rasa didn't answer, instead he asked, "You're a bounty hunter, aren't you? If I were to put a bounty on Gaara, what would your response be?"

"He's a f**king kid." Zoro bristled.

"And that's where you're wrong, Roronoa. Appearances can be so deceiving, can't they? Being someone who resides in the Shinobi world, you should know this to be a harsh and painful reality."

"I only go after kenjutsu users. I highly doubt that Gaara there is in any way skilled with a sword."

Rasa sent Zoro a glance he couldn't quite read. "How much would I have to pay you to eliminate him?"

Zoro couldn't believe he was having this conversation. "What about his parents?"

"Since my wife died giving birth to him, and as a failure for his intended purpose, I have nothing against disposing of Gaara. That *thing isn't* my son. I already have one son, and he is showing more than enough promise in his chosen field, along with my daughter."

Zoro almost unsheathed his sword out right then and there, but he knew that going against the Kazekage would be suicide. What would happen to Naruto? Or hell, even that Gaara kid. Instead, he tightly gripped Wado Ichimonji in his right hand and counted backwards from 100 by 3's.

"Gaara would also be very useful in improving your skills as a

warrior." Rasa nodded. "Ah. Here's your chance to see just what you're up against."

Zoro watched as the ball sailed towards Gaara's face, who was obviously not prepared to catch it, when a wall of sand suddenly shot up, immediately stopping the ball. Zoro and Rasa watched in silence as Naruto threw the ball at Gaara again a minute or so later, clearly wanting to see the sand shield a second time. Their odd little game resumed for about five minutes longer when Naruto's competitiveness kicked in once again and he sent the ball flying over Gaara's head. Gaara turned to run after the ball, and as he reached a hand out for it, grains sand began to float and turn into tendrils that reached for the wayward ball. Upon reaching the ball, the sand ultimately wrapped around and crushed it. It was with morbid fascination that Zoro watched as the ball got popped.

Judging by Gaara's visible reaction, the action had been entirely unintentional. Between the two boys, Naruto found this absolutely hilarious, and his laughter could be heard even in the Kazekage's office.

"Would your student still find it so humorous if that were someone's head? It's happened before. Gaara is a failed experiment; he has no control over his abilities, and is better off eliminated. It's for the betterment and safety of the village overall."

"...But he's your son."

"As I've said, that *thing* you call 'my son' is nothing more than a monster."

Zoro's face was shadowed by his head wrap as he glared at the floor. "I'll do it."

"What?" Rasa was honestly surprised to hear Zoro agree, and wanted to be sure that he heard the teen right.

Zoro finally glanced up at Rasa. "I'll take care of him."

Rasa studied Zoro for a moment before replying, "...Very well. Bring me his head and I'll pay you your reward."

With that, Zoro turned to leave but stopped when he realized that Puma wasn't where she was supposed to be. Why did she move? Both Rasa and Puma briefly had to wonder why Zoro was wandering around the former's office. Hating to deal with nonsense, Puma

walked up and grabbed Zoro's arm and guided him out and onto the street where Naruto and Gaara were.

****End Flashback****

In all honesty, Zoro didn't like it. He didn't think it was a good idea for Gaara to stay here; especially with a man like Rasa for his father. Well...there was Gaara's uncle, who seemed to be taking care of him, but there was also the fact that the Kazekage was hiring people to try and take out his own son, only to end in failure. How many people had to die unnecessarily before Rasa was happy?

"...'Betterment and safety of the village' my ass." Zoro muttered.

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Yashamaru set a plate of food down on the table in front of Gaara, and then took a seat for himself across from him.

"Itadakimasu," Yashamaru said, but Gaara simply remained silent as he studied his food.

A moment or two had passed before Gaara started eating much like a puppet would, visibly lost in thought. Gaara had actually sat there long enough that Yashamaru was starting to think that the boy wasn't going to even eat anything.

He had been observing from a distance when he saw the foreign boy willingly and more than happily play with Gaara. It was the first time in a long time Gaara genuinely seemed happy. Plus, the boy had thought that the ball popping incident was hilarious, and didn't show any fear whatsoever. Yashamaru had seen Puma escort Zoro out of the Kazekage's office, and then watched as the teen approached the two boys and pulled them to the side. That was when Yashamaru quickly assured the ANBU present that he would take care of it, and shooed the ANBU aside. They couldn't have their resident Jinchuuriki suddenly lose it – and Yashamaru was the only one Gaara listened to. Most of the time.

Yasamaru had kept out of sight but stayed within hearing distance. That was when he overheard Zoro talking.

"Your old man told me about you."

"Kid, has anyone ever come after you before? Like trying to kill you?"

"He hired me to kill you."

The voice of the other boy had protested vehemently. *"Zoro, you can't! He's my friend!"*

It had struck him as odd, that the boy had only known Gaara for an hour, and had witnessed what he could do, yet he already considered his nephew a friend.

"I didn't say that I was going to, brat."

There had been something that made Yashamaru twitch as he listened in on the conversation.

*"Gaara, listen. You shouldn't stay here. Even if this sand shield thing you have protects you, you shouldn't have to deal with attacks and f**king idiots getting themselves killed. You're the one who has to live with the result of their idiocy."*

Yashamaru thought of Rasa and his decision to try and eliminate Gaara because of their failure in properly Sealing the Ichibi away. While Konoha had fuinjutsu masters, all Suna had was an old healer and rudimentary techniques. They had been lucky that the Sealing portion even worked, but the Seal on Gaara was just...fragile. The Ichibi's chakra caused a severe imbalance in Gaara, resulting in him having little to no control of his abilities, along with never being able to sleep.

But then, that was when it happened;

"Father wouldn't do that..." Gaara started, but couldn't finish because he started hyperventilating. Zoro reached out, but a wall of sand stopped him before he even got within inches of Gaara. "He wouldn't..."

"Calm down and breathe, Gaara."

"Gaara, it's alright!"

"Calm down, raccoon-brat. No one's going to hurt you. We're just talking, got it?"

Nothing more than a simple statement and words of comfort, and the sand fell away. Yashamaru couldn't claim to understand it himself, but Zoro easily had a calming influence or something over someone he had only known for a few minutes. While Yashamaru was able to calm Gaara, it took more effort on his part and he had known Gaara for the

entirety of the boy's life.

"I mean...I personally think the sheath is safe, but your old man doesn't..."

Zoro seemed to have a different opinion of the Seal, though, given what Yashamaru could understand about that comment. He had seen Zoro unseal and reseal bodies, but the teen's knowledge of fuinjutsu didn't seem that expansive. Zoro probably didn't know exactly what he was dealing with. Rasa wouldn't reveal everything at the risk of the people he hired using the Ichibi's power.

"Do you have a monster in you too?" The other boy had asked. It was with that question that Yashamaru realized that the other boy was a Jinchuuriki as well; which meant Zoro knew *exactly* what he was dealing with. *Where* had Zoro found a Jinchuuriki?!

"I-I don't know? People...people usually say that I'm the monster-"

"You're not a monster." The statement was said so simply and resolutely. *"Look...we aren't sticking around here for long; we've gotta keep moving, but if you want to come with us, we'll be waiting outside the South Gate until one o'clock tonight."*

They were offering Gaara a way out. Rasa would no longer have to deal with the threat of his citizens randomly being attacked. But simply handing over a Jinchuuriki was dangerous...

Zoro was an odd one, but Yashamaru had never gotten the impression from the teen that he had ill-intentions. Of course, that was what *made* a person dangerous. When they could hide every aspect of who they really were and slip in between different personas with practiced ease. But throughout his limited interactions with Zoro, he had judged the teen to be blunt, earnest, and looking for a challenge, along with having various quirks he had seen that brought out the teen's still-present childishness when he was called out on them.

"We'll be waiting at the South Gate. Please come with us!"

"I'm just like you, ya'know...I have a monster in me, too...but Zoro-nii saved me, and he'll save you too."

The truth was...Yashamaru was tired of lying. He didn't like warping Karura's legacy in order to "test" Gaara. But if he could somehow get Gaara to leave with Zoro, Rasa would get what he wanted in a way; and Gaara would get to have a life.

Yashamaru put down his spoon and tiredly rubbed his eyes. What was he supposed to do? Again, he glanced at Gaara, who was still overly focused on his plate. An image of Gaara when he was an innocent, lonely three year old flashed unbidden in his mind. It had been fairly easy to come into physical contact with Gaara during the first few years of his life, but Rasa hadn't allowed any contact unless it was absolutely necessary.

Yashamaru understood that Gaara couldn't control his abilities when he was upset, and the child didn't understand why the other children were afraid of him. He seemed vaguely aware that he was somehow different, but didn't fully understand what that difference was. When he was younger, Gaara sometimes spoke of the "monster eating his mind" but rarely mentioned it unless he was explicitly asked.

It pained Yashamaru that Gaara didn't understand why. Gaara had asked, of course. But Yashamaru had explicitly been told what he could and couldn't say to Gaara about why people were scared of him. So he always had a myriad of excuses prepared. But Yashamaru believed that the only reason Gaara believed anything he said was because he was the boy's uncle, and family didn't lie to each other.

But then, there came the day that changed everything. The sand had always obeyed Gaara's unwitting commands, causing slight injuries here and there. But of course, there were the few people who had seriously been hurt. None of them had died, yet – but there were a few village children who had lost either a hand or a leg; forever diverting the course of their lives before they had even begun. As an understandable result, people feared Gaara; and amongst those who feared Gaara, were Temari and Kankuro, his older siblings. While they didn't encourage the fear, they didn't attempt to dissuade it either. In fact, Yashamaru was fairly positive that Gaara had no idea he even *had* siblings. Gaara simply thought that the older boy and girl were an odd pair who held some loyalty to his father whenever he saw them around the Kazekage's tower; and he was more than aware that they were scared of him. He was also explicitly told to stay away from them by Rasa.

****Four years ago...****

A four-year-old Gaara stared glumly down at the ground as he slowly walked home. Today was yet another failed attempt to make friends with the local children. Once again, the "run away from the monster" game had reared its ugly head and the other children ran away screaming before he even got beyond a simple greeting. There was the

sudden sound of furious whispers, and Gaara paused, looking around. He didn't see anyone, yet he could hear them.

It only took a moment for Gaara to realize what he called "the monster in his mind" was trying to speak to him again. Sighing, Gaara pushed the whispers away. The monster was only really loud when Gaara tried to sleep – key word being *tried*. He once almost drifted off and that was when he heard the monster's voice. It was only bits and pieces of enraged, incompressible screaming that absolutely terrified him, and he was convinced that the owner of that voice could gobble him up. Gaara was the very definition of insomniac, and never sleeping left him to his own devices for hours on end. That mostly involved standing by himself in the middle of his room surrounded by toys he didn't really have any idea what to do with, while shutting out the voice and staying awake.

He had a few favorite toys, like his red ball and teddy bear. He had other toys, but it seemed that they required more than one person to be used properly. Yashamaru couldn't play with him "because he was an adult and was busy." But that didn't explain why he had observed other adults playing with children. Yashamaru had said something about "being presentable" or something. The boy didn't fully understand it.

As Gaara walked through the front door of his home, Yashamaru greeted him.

"Welcome home, Gaara. Are you hungry?"

"No...I'm going up to room. Goodnight." Gaara mumbled, and made his way upstairs to his room.

Gaara stared at his array of toys for about ten minutes before selecting a small rubber duck. He squeezed it and the duck let out a wheezing noise that became irritating even to his ears after the fourth squeeze. Placing the rubber duck to the side, Gaara picked up his bear. There wasn't much he was required to do other than hold it.

Gaara stared at the wall, and began thinking about what he was going to do. He began formulating a plan where he could possibly play with the other children. His sand was difficult to control when he was upset, so staying calm was a must. He had unwittingly injured a girl named Ami around his age a few weeks ago when his sand wrapped around her leg. She hadn't lost the leg, but it didn't help that the fear directed towards him only increased.

Gaara once had asked Yashamaru why people were scared of him.

"Are they scared of the monster? Am I the monster? Is that why they're scared of me?"

Yashamaru smiled. "People fear what they don't understand, and they hate what they fear. The world would be a better place if people tried to understand each other. Just...give them a chance to understand you, and try to be understanding in turn."

"So...if I'm more understanding, then I'll have friends?" Gaara enquired hopefully.

Yashamaru hesitated, but only briefly. "Yes, you will."

It didn't really answer Gaara's question, but it did give him some insight. Try to be more understanding. Of what? He didn't really know. But his uncle said that was how to make friends and Yashamaru wouldn't lie to him. After all, family didn't lie to each other.

So all he had to do was be more understanding. And be calm. And make sure that his sand didn't unwittingly go grabbing onto people and injuring them.

"I could just try and *talk* to them, right?" Gaara asked his bear.

The bear didn't respond, and simply gazed back with black button-eyes.

"So...that's what I'll do..." Gaara mumbled, and so he waited for daylight to come.

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That morning, Gaara was pretty sure he had everything planned out – and Yashamaru had to wonder what was on Gaara's mind. The boy seemed more focused, or distracted than usual.

"What's going on, Gaara?"

"Nothing." Gaara lied, and it was clear to Yashamaru that he had done so. Instead of calling Gaara out on it, Yashamaru just responded with,

"Alright. Just be careful."

Yashamaru had to take care of a few medicines that needed to be sent out that day, so he would be busy. It wasn't like Gaara was conspiring

anything dangerous, and ever since Ami had been injured, the local children had widened the berth between themselves and Gaara. Gaara continued his fruitless approaches, but no-one had gotten so much as a scratch since the incident with Ami.

It was early afternoon when Gaara finally set out towards the center of the village where the majority of the children his age and up would play. He hoped that today the children weren't going to play "run away from the monster" or throw something at him that caused his shield to respond. At first, Gaara thought that the children *were* playing with him, but he had a sharp enough mind to put two and two together and realize that they weren't really playing *with* him. He didn't want to be the monster that they all avoided.

So here he was, and he slowly approached a group of seven children; three girls, four boys. One of the girls looked to be a few years older than the others, and she was the first to notice Gaara's slow approach, but she didn't say a word. Gaara walked stiffly so that his arms remained at his sides, doing his best to prove that he wasn't the monster everyone said he was. He had gotten within five feet of them when the others finally noticed his presence.

"Ahh!" one of the boys who was closest to him stumbled away, and started to run, followed by the others, minus the older girl.

But Gaara didn't give chase nor did he reach out for them. Upon realizing that Gaara wasn't running after them reaching out with his sand, a few of the children stopped running. The older girl crossed her arms and gave Gaara a look.

"What do you want?" Her tone was angry, but everything about her body language showed that she was scared.

"What's Maiko doing?" one of the younger girls whispered. She received equally confused and concerned glances while others shrugged.

Gaara hadn't actually thought that someone would willingly talk to him. Glancing nervously at Maiko and the others behind her, he responded quietly, "I...I was wondering if...we could, um, play a game...?"

Maiko made a face, not exactly angry, but not too welcoming either. She glanced back at the other kids behind her. "I know a game we can play."

"What?!" the other kids with her questioned in surprise.

Gaara was surprised that it had actually worked! Looking hopeful, he asked, "What game?"

The girl, surprising even the kids who were with her ran towards Gaara in what would have been an admirable amount of courage in any other situation, and violently shoved him. Since his sand hadn't perceived what she was doing as any form of attack, she was able to come into contact with him and she very successfully shoved Gaara to the ground.

As she glared down at Gaara, her tone was so even, she would have done any Suna-Nin proud. "As if we'd ever play with a monster like *you*."

If Maiko had only said those words, things probably wouldn't have been so bad. Gaara had heard those words all the time, but this was different. At first, Gaara had been too surprised to respond, and he simply laid there flat on his back trying to process what just happened. Why had she been angry? This wasn't part of any game, was it? If so, he didn't really like it.

"Stay away from us, you monster! Don't you know why everyone hates you?!" Maiko furiously shouted. "You ruin *everything*! My little sister Ami is *never* going to walk again because of you! Why don't you do everyone a favor and just freaking *die*, already?!"

Those words hurt in a way Gaara couldn't really understand. He had apologized! Why wasn't that good enough? The whispers in his mind were making his ears ring and his head ache. It was like something was trying to claw its way out.

\F*ck that little bitch! Tear her f*cking limbs off!

Gaara grabbed the sides of his head in pain, and began writhing on the ground while the other kids finally processed what Maiko had done. She had made the monster angry, and Maiko now was slowly coming to the realization that she shouldn't have shoved the monster.

"What did you *do*?!"

"HEY!" a man's voice called out, and the children hadn't even gone three steps before a few ANBU swept in and grabbed them.

"Get Yashamaru here *now*!" a woman shouted. Even though her face

was concealed by a Puma mask, the children could feel her glare. "And get these stupid brats somewhere safe."

"Hai!" The ANBU swept away with the children, while the woman and her companion stayed, watching warily as the Jinchuuriki convulsed and screamed from its place on the ground. They could feel the dark aura leaking out of the host, and they were prepared to fight for their lives.

Yashamaru came in what felt like hours later, when in reality it had only been three minutes since Maiko had shoved the Jinchuuriki to the ground.

"Gaara! Gaara, are you alright?" Yashamaru raced to his nephew's side, ignoring everything and reached to grab Gaara's shoulder. A wall of sand encased Yashamaru's hand when he got within inches. Yashamaru forced himself to remain calm. "G-Gaara? Gaara, it's me, please calm down, it's alright."

Gaara was curling into himself, grabbing his head and grunting in pain.

"Listen to me, Gaara...it's alright...just-just calm down, okay? We'll..." Yashamaru searched for something to say. He wasn't sure what was triggering this reaction, but he didn't want to say something that could backfire. "We'll play a game."

The sand encasing his hand suddenly tightened, cutting into his hand, and Yashamaru flinched. He could see a few spots of red growing in the sand. His hand wasn't broken, that was very fortunate. But he was at a point where losing his hand was a high possibility.

"Gaara, you're hurting me." Yashamaru said carefully, but there was no response. "Take a deep breath, Gaara. You're fine."

The ANBU were eyeing the situation uncertainly; but they had their weapons drawn, ready for a fight. Yashamaru spent the better part of an hour desperately trying to make sure that Gaara didn't release the Ichibi and that he didn't lose his life or limb in the process. Quietly and very nervously, another ANBU approached and informed Yashamaru of what had transpired.

Frowning, Yashamaru responded, "I see. Thank you for telling me."

Then, he turned his attention back to Gaara. Those kids...little to no repercussions would be handed out to those little bastards.

"Can you hear me, Gaara?" Yashamaru muttered, ignoring the pain in his hand. "What those kids did, it wasn't fair and it wasn't right...it hurts, doesn't it? You know, a wound of a heart is different from a flesh wound. Unlike a flesh wound, there are no ointments to heal it, and there are times when they never heal."

Gaara stopped moving for a time; the only sound was his ragged breathing. Yashamaru continued talking; mostly trying to explain why people did things to others that were cruel and unfair, and the results that came about from those actions.

Finally, Gaara slowly and deliberately sat up, but he didn't seem to acknowledge Yashamaru, or anyone else for that matter. He just stared blankly ahead, and that was when Yashamaru saw it. Gaara was crying – he wasn't outright bawling, but it was more of a silent sort of crying that was even more heartbreaking.

"I..." Gaara started, and he slowly turned to look at Yashamaru. "I don't understand why...I tried..." he then finally seemed to realize that his sand was wrapped around Yashamaru's hand. The sand fell away, and a sense of relief flooded through those present. Gaara eyed Yashamaru's hand, studying the wounds.

"I'm sorry." Gaara mumbled.

"This is nothing." Yashamaru assured. "Let's go home."

He reached for Gaara's shoulder, and flinched back when a wall of sand shot up. Gaara glanced up at Yashamaru, looking somewhat guilty. Saying nothing, Gaara turned away towards their house. Yashamaru watched the retreating form of his nephew with growing concern.

As Yashamaru had figured, the children involved in the incident weren't really reprimanded, and Gaara was told explicitly by Rasa to stay away from the other children. It was disheartening to see Gaara completely shut down, even though it had only been for a few hours.

Something changed in Gaara that day. Most of the time, he stared at people impassively, but he still had moments of hesitation when he wasn't sure how to handle a situation or an interaction if he had one. Now, he spent most of his time staring at the ground, and not really acknowledging the people around him.

But it was through this that Yashamaru learned Gaara could be petty to the point of spite. Maiko found herself face-planting numerous

times over the course of the following week thanks to well-controlled and well-concealed placements of sand. Yashamaru realized who the culprit was by the third time it happened, and finally put a stop to it when he felt that a ruffled, scraped and bruised Maiko had enough.

It was when he watched as Gaara closed himself off even from him that Yashamaru began wishing for Gaara to somehow escape this place and have a life that didn't involve such cruel loneliness.

000 Present Day *000*

Yashamaru ran his fingers over the faded scars on his opposite hand. After that day, Yashamaru hadn't had any sort of physical contact with Gaara. Physical contact had become just another form of attack in Gaara's mind, and it had been that way for four years too long. It was also the last time Yashamaru had seen Gaara cry, or show any emotion that wasn't subdued. That silent wish he had made for a better life for Gaara was slowly coming to the forefront of his mind.

Today, Ami was able to walk, but she had a very pronounced limp and would never walk normally again for the rest of her life. Any prospects for even a small amount of normalcy had dwindled down to near zero.

It was a life that no child or adult deserved. Yashamaru glanced over at Gaara again, who was now putting his plate in the sink. His nephew hadn't said a word since his meeting with Zoro and the fellow Jinchuuriki. Gaara silently made his way out of the kitchen, not even saying a word. Yashamaru heard him go upstairs to his room. Since Gaara didn't sleep, he simply stood in the middle of his room with his favorite teddy bear and stared at the walls, as was routine.

"You're not a monster. Look...we aren't sticking around here for long; we've gotta keep moving, but if you want to come with us, we'll be waiting outside the South Gate until one o'clock tonight."

"...Zoro-nii saved me, and he'll save you too."

There was a soft knock on the front door, interrupting the man's thoughts and Yashamaru went to answer it. Temari looked hesitantly past Yashamaru, half-expecting Gaara to be there and worried about what she would do if Gaara happened to be there.

"He's upstairs." Yashamaru provided flatly. His brother-in-law, niece and nephew all knew of his dislike for how Gaara was excluded.

"My father wants to see you." Temari said quickly, not meeting Yashamaru's gaze. She didn't like how he looked at her when it came down to how the younger of her two brothers was treated. Yashamaru may not have said certain things out loud, but she was certain that her uncle thought them. The way she complied with her father's demands unquestioningly, how she and Kankuro heard people talk about and treat Gaara, yet never spoke up against it, how they both ignored him if they ever somehow happened to be in the same room...the list could go on.

The pair left the house (Gaara wasn't going anywhere this time of night) and went to the house where Rasa and his two older children resided.

"Evening, Yashamaru-san." Rasa greeted casually. He was seated in armchair and motioned for Yashamaru to sit across from him. "How are you?"

"As well as I could be." Yashamaru responded stiffly as he sat down.

Temari and Kankuro both stood to the side, observing carefully.

"Upstairs, both of you." Rasa didn't even spare the two a glance and neither of them argued, although Kankuro looked a little put out for being excluded.

Once they were gone, Rasa only asked for the sake of formality, "Would you like some tea or sake?"

Yashamaru frowned. While he wasn't vocal, he let his disapproval be known in other ways. While he wasn't really disrespectful, he found ways to show that he didn't agree with Rasa's decisions.

"What do you want, Rasa?"

"Right down to business, I see. Very well, then. I suppose that means you won't be wanting any refreshments." Rasa shrugged as if Yashamaru's disrespect didn't really matter. "You're aware that Roronoa Zoro showed up in Suna?"

"Yes." Yashamaru had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"I hired him to assassinate Gaara."

Yashamaru acted surprised. "You what? But...he's an outsider, and I was under the impression that he only went after kenjutsu users..."

why would you hire him?" Yashamaru then had to ask the next question that popped into his head. "Why are you telling me this? You've never told me about the ANBU you've hired, or when you've hired them..."

"Because, I want you to attempt to kill Gaara if Roronoa fails. As you know, Gaara is our biggest failure...but at the same time, this is the ultimate test for him. If Gaara passes, he might just finally prove useful, even if he'll be difficult to control."

Zoro's words echoed in Yashamaru's mind once again.

"I'll understand if you don't want to, but a brat like yourself shouldn't have to live in a place where their own parent puts a target on their backs."

The teen was right. Probably, if Yashamaru had been a braver man, he would have simply taken Gaara and left at the first sign of Rasa's dissatisfaction. But things like loyalty, fear, even something as simple as a promise, could hold people in a place where they don't have much of a choice. Or perhaps if the choice is there, they are too afraid to grab it. But sometimes, a chance presents itself in the form of a wandering teen who already had one Jinchuuriki under his care and actually offered the chance for a better life. That was when a person had to grab onto that opportunity and not let go.

"I understand." Yashamaru said stiffly. "I'll see myself out."

Yashamaru gave a quick bow, and left.

Now, his mind was racing. **What am I going to do?**

It was a matter of convincing Gaara to leave with Roronoa and not have a reason to return. He knew that Roronoa was waiting until *one o'clock* that night, so he would have to time things perfectly.

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It was just a bit passed midnight when Rasa received a message from one of the ANBU. Bird held out a scroll for him to take, and Rasa accepted it and nodded his permission for Bird to leave. He read the scroll's contents, which consisted of a rather simple message:

"At 2300 hours, Roronoa Zoro failed in his attempt to kill Gaara. The boy who had been with him tried as well and perished in the attempt. Gaara is currently in an emotional state. Will now move forward with second half of plan."

Rasa sighed as he burned away the scroll with a flare of chakra. As the Kazekage, he would do whatever it took to take care of his village – even if it was eight years too late.

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Gaara was currently sitting on the rooftop of his home staring up at the full moon. The whispers in his mind weren't so bad when he did this simple activity. He was thinking about the boy who had more than happily played with him that day, along with the older brother who told him that his father was hiring people to kill him because "his sword wasn't sheathed properly" or something like that. He didn't really understand it. But both of them wanted him to leave Suna with them, because his father apparently had been the one to send those masked Shinobi to attack him.

The thing was though, he didn't fully understand *why* his father would be sending the ANBU to kill him. Was it because of how his sand responded to his emotions? Was it because he *was* in fact the monster that whispered in the back of his mind? Or maybe it was because he had unwittingly hurt Yashamaru a few times. There were those two older children that he had often seen around his father's office – he had unwittingly injured them slightly before. It hadn't been anything too serious – just a few cuts that required stitches from what he had been told when he asked. But that had happened years ago.

Gaara had always said that he was sorry, and Yashamaru always said that it was alright. The boy was so deep in thought that he barely even registered the metallic ringing noise in the air when his sand suddenly shot up, protecting him from the attack.

A masked ninja stood across from him on the rooftop, kunai in hand. Gaara's eyes widened in fear as his attacker threw the kunai. His sand automatically blocked the attack, but that didn't deter the assassin. He drew two more kunai, this time with exploding tags attached.

"Kid, has anyone ever come after you before? Like trying to kill you?"

"He hired me to kill you."

His father wouldn't *really* do that, would he? Not having time to dwell on his doubts, Gaara quickly turned on his heel and ran, his sand raising once again as more kunai shot at him. An explosion rang out, causing his ears to ring and the monster inside to start screaming in

glee for the fight and begging for blood. Gaara tried to ignore the monster and began desperately calling out, "Oji-chan! Oji-chan!"

His assailant suddenly closed in on him, and Gaara froze, wondering if the reason for Yashamaru not showing up was because this man had killed him.

"STOP!" Gaara demanded and swung his arm out. The ANBU had barely gotten within a foot of Gaara before his sand shot out in an array of spikes and skewering the man through his stomach and the right side of his chest. The man slumped against the wall and slid down, leaving a trail of red.

"Who...who are you?" Gaara asked tentatively. "Did...did my father send you?"

Labored breathing was his only response. Gaara stared, wondering what he should do. Slowly, Gaara approached the ANBU and removed his mask. Gaara looked into the eyes of his uncle, Yashamaru.

The boy froze, dropping the mask. An ominous voice chuckled in the back of his mind. *"You can't trust anyone."* The monster added in a singsong voice, *"That Zoro guy lied to you. He said no-one was going to hurt you."*

"Gaara..." Yashamaru breathed out in a whisper. He coughed up blood, causing him to go into a horrible coughing fit. Finally gasping in rattling breaths, Yashamaru looked over at his nephew. "Gaara...I'm sorry...to have...done this. Ro-" Yashamaru was cut off when he starting coughing again, but he forced himself to take in a painful breath. "Roronoa told you...the truth. Rasa really...really was... sending...people after you."

"But why? Is it because I'm...because of the monster?"

Yashamaru only nodded. Looking at Gaara, he took in the boy's forlorn features. Yashamaru had been lying to Gaara for so long, but since this was the last time he would ever see the boy, he was going to do right by Gaara and Karura. "Rasa...no... *I* lied to you...your mother...loved you so much. Dying...wasn't your...fault." Yashamaru's breathing was becoming more difficult, as was speaking. "You...go with Zoro...don't...come back...Karura would want...you to live..."

Gaara looked at his uncle disbelievingly. But Yashamaru didn't seem to be able to focus on him. He was trying to process what Yashamaru was saying. His mother had loved him? He wanted him to go with

Zoro?

Yashamaru hoped that he bought Gaara enough time, as he had told the ANBU to stay away until the bigger explosion went off.

With a sad smile, Yashamaru studied his nephew's face one last time. He didn't have the strength or the time to say much more. **If you really are who I think you are Zoro, then surely you will succeed where I have failed. You will give Gaara the life he deserves. You aren't tied to Suna...Be free, Gaara!**

He slowly reached out to Gaara, but the sand intercepted his hand. That wasn't surprising. "I..." Yashamaru looked at Gaara and smiled sadly. He couldn't lie to Gaara anymore – he no longer had to. "I love you."

Gaara hadn't heard anyone ever say those words to him, and his eyes widened in surprise. His uncle *loved* him? But why? Gaara couldn't understand. He was a monster, and ruined everything he touched. Why was Yashamaru doing this? Gaara's racing thoughts were interrupted when another explosion went off, and as always, his sand protected him. When his shield dropped, Yashamaru's body was unrecognizable.

Gaara stared, unable to move. He didn't understand. **\ "*He lied to you. He killed himself to get away from you.*" **

Six ANBU gathered mere seconds later, but before they could get within five feet of him, Gaara's chaotic sand reacted violently, killing all of them.

**\ "*YES! YES! KILL THEM ALL! LIARS! FILTH!*" **

Gaara slowly walked towards the South Gate, fighting back tears. He hardly even registered that there were people around him. There was shouting and screaming, but they were suddenly silenced.

**\ "*Let me out...I'll f*cking rip them to shreds!*" **

Why? Gaara glared hatefully at an ANBU who suddenly had her head crushed. She deserved to die. Because, she was a liar. They were all *liars*! He couldn't trust *anyone*!

\ "*THAT'S RIGHT! You can't trust that man...he was hired to kill you, just like them . That other boy is just using you...he'll kill you the moment your back is turned! You only have ME to rely on! I'm all*

you need! LET ME OUT!"

Gaara's sand was swirling around him so erratically, it forced the ANBU back to regroup and try to come up with another plan of attack. The sandstorm around Gaara was picking up, and starting to grow and spread throughout Suna. There was also the problem of feeling the Ichibi's suppressing chakra, warning them that the monster could break out any second. The thought was terrifying; especially now that Yashamaru was gone. They had to eliminate him either before the Ichibi was released or all of them were killed. But they had lost sight of their target.

"Where is he?!"

"Find him, *now!*"

"What if that thing breaks loose?"

"We'll just have to kill the thing before that happens!"

The Suna ANBU all spread out in varying teams of two and three to find the creature and finally end its reign of terror.

000

A few miles outside south of Suna, Zoro was snoring away, while Naruto was cleaning his sword. He wanted to make sure that he maintained it, just like Zoro said he should. There was an underlying fear that he would somehow lose the sword if he didn't take care of it. Suddenly, there was an explosion somewhere within the village, causing Naruto to jerk and cut his fingers. Naruto ignored his injury when something within him flared, and he felt as if he were suddenly itching for a fight. He wanted to rip apart that strange source of energy, and he almost ran off in search of it.

But it was powerful enough for Zoro to feel too, and he quickly sat up with a snort and a "what the hell is that" expression.

Minutes that felt like hours ticked by; and gradually, they saw the form of Gaara walking towards them, with sand whipping around him. Bits of sand was sticking to him strangely, making him look part animal, and his eyes were slowly flashing in between their usual green with an eerie yellow and black. His face was in all honesty, creepy; his expression was emotionless, yet there was a definite thirst for blood.

"...Gaara?" Naruto asked hesitantly, not trusting himself to approach

the other boy. The Kyuubi within him wanted to tear Gaara limb from limb.

Zoro slowly stood up, not liking this one bit. What had happened in between now and earlier this evening?

"Naruto, stay right there, don't move." Zoro ordered, and Naruto could only nod.

Zoro took a step forward, when two ANBU unexpectedly appeared.

"There you are!" one of them shouted as they both threw some sort of oversized chain-and-shuriken weapon at Gaara in what was undoubtedly some form of a team attack. Gaara's shield responded very violently, grabbing onto the pair of men who could do nothing but scream before they were crushed into a pulp that disappeared into the writhing sand.

Well, shit. Gaara turned his attention onto Zoro now. Double shit. While at any other time Zoro would have wanted to fight whatever *this* was, the boy before him was barely even recognizable.

Zoro slowly approached Gaara, looking serious. "Gaara?"

"You're going to kill me."

Gaara's voice was absolutely impassive; completely different from the boy who Zoro had seen earlier that day.

"What makes you say that?" Zoro didn't pause. He had to calm Gaara down, somehow. But he wasn't sure how to go about doing it.

"Father hired you, just like the rest of them." Gaara suddenly winced as he gripped his head in pain. Taking in gasping breaths, Gaara was torn in between either talking to Zoro or killing him; or finally succumbing to the monster that was screaming for more blood in the back of his mind.

Zoro continued walking forward, making his way towards Gaara. Zoro didn't have a plan, as he left most things to his skill with a sword or luck, or whatever people wanted to call it.

"DON'T COME ANY CLOSER!" Gaara snarled, but Zoro continued on.

"No. This isn't you."

"I...I said *stop!*"

Zoro paused at the feeling of the dark energy. Scowling, Zoro said, "Pull it in, Gaara. You aren't a monster, and you shouldn't let it control you. You can do it. You're the one in control."

"Liar! You lied to me!"

Zoro frowned at the sound of two distinct voices coming out a second time, but he continued walking forward until he was only a few feet from Gaara, who was shouting at him again. "I said ***stay back!***"

Zoro barely flinched as sand shot passed him and cut his arm. He only stopped when he was within arm's reach of Gaara. "Gaara, I meant it when I said I wanted you to come with us. And when I said that no-one was going to hurt you." Jerking a thumb at the other brat behind him, Zoro added, "Plus, Naruto already went and decided that you two're friends."

Gaara looked up at Zoro with tear-filled eyes mixed with fear. One of his eyes was completely black and yellow. "Why? I don't understand."

"Because, this," Zoro motioned at Suna, "is not a life that a kid like you deserves. Hell, I wouldn't wish this life on someone that I hated."

*\ "He's lying. He's going to kill you. You can't trust him." *

"You're lying."

Zoro blinked. He thought that he sounded convincing. "What makes you say that?"

"The monster in my head knows you're lying."

"The monster...?" Zoro's eyes narrowed. He almost went with something like, 'you can't trust anything that bastard says' but thought better of it. A sword that has a mind of its own is a dangerous one. "What is the monster saying?"

"You're a liar, and you're going to try and kill me, just like everyone else." Gaara growled out.

*\ "That's right, Gaara. You have to kill him before he kills you." *

Gaara raised a hand as sand began to wrap around Zoro's arms and legs. Although Zoro stiffened, he refused to move.

Gaara's voice was becoming more animalistic as he added, "I ***have*** to ***kill*** you before you ***kill me!***"

This was worse than Zoro thought. He was having a very one-sided argument with a monster through a terrified little kid.

"But I'm not going to kill you." Zoro stated evenly.

Naruto watched from where he sat, doing his best to suppress his own demon. What if Zoro-nii didn't survive this? Naruto quickly shook his head of the thought, and focused on Zoro and Gaara.

"Come on..." the blond all but desperately whispered.

***\ "Then he'll just use you and then abandon you once your usefulness is done! Your mother and uncle died because they were abandoning you." ***

But that turned out to be the wrong thing for the Ichibi to say, because it brought back some of Gaara's senses.

"Why?" Gaara asked again. "I don't understand."

Zoro gave Gaara a questioning look. "Why what?"

"Why did they leave me behind?!" Gaara demanded angrily. Zoro shuddered slightly when he felt the sand slice into his skin, and a few drops of blood leaked from in between the shifting grains. "My mother and Oji-chan left me behind...they said they loved me but they left me behind..."

***\ "People who claim to love you will always either betray you or abandon you! That's why you can't trust anyone but me!" ***

Zoro slowly reached a hand forward in an attempt at comfort, but the sand around his arm tightened. But Zoro didn't even react.

"Don't touch me!" Gaara angrily demanded.

"My sensei once told me that people will go to great lengths and do things that we don't always understand because they love someone."

***\ "THEY'RE ALL IDIOTS AND LIARS! He's just prolonging his death. JUST F*CKING KILL HIM ALREADY! LET ME TASTE HIS BLOOD!" ***

Zoro took a deep breath and then glared down at Gaara. "What the hell are you doing, sand-brat?! Why are you suddenly listening to that stupid monster's voice?! Drown him out, because if you listen to the shit that thing is spewing out, then you really *will* be the monster everyone says you are!" Zoro then ripped his arm out of Gaara's sand's

hold, ignoring the bloody cuts as he drew Wado Ichimonji, and its blade caught the moonlight. Gaara stared at Zoro in disbelief mixed with fear. Was Zoro going to attack him now? "You see this sword, Gaara? I, Roronoa Zoro, make a swordsman's promise right here and now that I *will* protect you! You never have to be afraid, because if anyone tries to hurt you," Zoro sent Gaara a feral grin that would have made a person with even the smallest sense of survival turn tail and run. But Gaara wasn't known for having the sense of survival where he had to run away. "Then they'll have to deal with *me*, first. Got that, Gaara?"

Gaara stared at Zoro in silence for a moment or two long enough that the teen started questioning whether or not Gaara had understood him. But then the sand around them fell just seconds later, and Gaara practically tackled Zoro into a hug that was awkward for both of them. Gaara wasn't an expert in giving hugs, and Zoro wasn't an expert in receiving them; especially from children. He ended up dropping his sword to the ground and sinking down to Gaara's level as the boy sobbed into his chest loudly.

"Uh...you're safe now..." Zoro said, and then after thinking for a moment started patting Gaara on the back.

"Are you okay, now?" Naruto asked as he carefully approached the two.

Gaara suddenly pulled away, looking embarrassed. "Sorry..." he noticed Zoro's wounds. "I injured you! I'm sorry!"

"This is nothing." Zoro shrugged as he picked up his sword and sheathed it. "I've had worse."

"You aren't mad?" Gaara asked tentatively.

Zoro sent Gaara a look. Hadn't he just said that it didn't bother him? "I'm not mad." He sent Suna a wary glance. "We should get going. You feel okay to walk, right?" Gaara nodded. "Come on you two."

Naruto quickly fell in step beside Zoro, while Gaara stared back at the place that had been his home for the entirety of his existence. He thought of what Yashamaru had told him before he died.

"Go with Zoro, don't come back. Karura would want you to live."

"I love you."

"Hurry up, Gaara!" Naruto called out.

"Keep up, sand-brat!" Zoro added, crossing his arms. "You don't want to get left behind."

Slowly, Gaara turned his back on Suna and jogged a bit until he had caught up with Zoro and Naruto. "Where are we going?"

"Kiri." Zoro answered brusquely.

"Wait, we have to head *all* that way?!" demanded Naruto. He knew that from his many times looking at the map that Kiri was a small country to the east that was in the *middle* of the *ocean*. "Gah, I hope we run into some more merchants..." Naruto quickly turned to Gaara. "You *have* to help keep a close eye on Zoro-nii. If we're not careful, he'll get us lost in the middle of the desert."

"I don't get lost, brat!" Zoro denied, whacking Naruto on the head.

"You do too!" Naruto couldn't reach that high and opted for hitting Zoro just above his hip.

Gaara observed the two curiously. Was it common for people to hit each other like this? He wasn't sure. Was Zoro mad? He didn't seem mad. At least, not in the way he had usually seen people act when angry. Naruto didn't seem that angry, and he kept trying to get Gaara to see his side about something, and Zoro was adamantly denying Naruto's accusations. Gaara didn't understand his new companions at all...but they were amusing.

It wasn't long until Suna was left far behind them.

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The sun had barely risen over the horizon when Rasa stared out at the destruction. It wasn't much, as only Yashamaru and Gaara's house was damaged in the bomb blast. But they had lost ten ANBU and Yashamaru in ridding Suna of the Demon. While they had found the charred remains of Yashamaru (who had only been identifiable due to various unique aspects of his uniform) there was no evidence of Gaara being killed, yet there was no evidence of him still being alive, either.

Last night, they had felt the Ichibi's wild chakra, only for it to suddenly fade out. It didn't really make sense, but at least the monster was gone. Rasa of course, had his suspicions; but it wasn't really like he could do anything about them. Suna didn't have the luxury of spare

Shinobi, and couldn't exactly go out hunting for someone when they might be dead or off wandering only the gods know where – plus, they wouldn't be paid for it.

Speaking of luxuries, Rasa couldn't waste time worrying about whether or not Gaara had truly been taken care of. He was no longer a threat to Suna and its residents, and that was all that mattered. The Kazekage had other things to focus on.

Rasa rubbed the bridge of his nose, pondering over everything they would have to accomplish and when – it didn't take long for the situation involving Gaara to be pushed into the back of his mind and never really thought of again. While their village would more than likely take a few blows for this, they would just have to find other ways to recover and get back in the good graces of the Daimyo. With everyone working together, they could recover and hopefully rival Konoha once again.

iii

Chapter End Notes

So...Gaara doesn't have his 'ai' tattoo. Told ya I was taking some liberties with the world and its people – can't say you weren't warned...

iii

:About Sand:

iii

"There is only one happiness in this life, to love and be loved." – George Sand

iii

Whiney Anakin Voice "I hate sand. It's so coarse and rough and irritating!"

Cute Dory Voice "I like sand. Sand is squishy."

Loud Naruto Voice "Sand is so boring, Dattebayo!"

Impassive Gaara Voice "Sand-Coffin."

Bodybuilding Zoro Voice "...Sand is good for training your

endurance."

Attempting to Chat with Tailed Beasts can be like banging your Head against the Wall, Repeatedly

Chapter Summary

The boys meet their respective Bijū, and things get kinda scary. Zoro ends up revealing something about himself when he gets into a fight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Gaara observed the two curiously. Was it common for people to hit each other like this? He wasn't sure. Was Zoro mad? He didn't seem mad. At least, not in the way he had usually seen people act when angry. Naruto didn't seem that angry, and he kept trying to get Gaara to see his side about something. Gaara didn't understand his new companions at all...but they were amusing.

It wasn't long until Suna was left far behind them.

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It wasn't long until Gaara learned that Naruto's warning about how easily Zoro got lost had been a severe understatement.

About an hour earlier

Naruto was keeping an eye on Zoro, while simultaneously looking at the various rock formations that surrounded them.

"Wow...cool..." Naruto grinned at a few of the formations that towered over them. That was when Naruto spotted something. "Oh! Zoro-nii! Gaara! Look!" Naruto walked quickly but carefully, and pointed out a large, rusty-red lizard with orange stripes that was sunning itself on a rock. "I've never seen a lizard this big before, Dattebayo!"

Gaara gave a small smile. "That's really interesting...I think it's a Gila-Mimic. It *looks* poisonous, but you can tell by the roundness of the scales that it's the harmless one."

"Ooh...so cool..." Naruto whispered in awe. "You're so smart, Gaara!"

Gaara blushed, thankful for the flush already on his cheeks. Naruto thought that he was smart? Only Yashamaru ever told him such. To hear it from someone else... Gaara mumbled, "...Thank you..."

The lizard decided that it no longer wanted to be a spectacle to the boys, so it took off into another rocks numerous crannies.

"Bye, Lizard-san!" Naruto waved.

"Where's Zoro?" Gaara suddenly asked, feeling a slight panic in his gut.

"What? Zoro-nii?" Naruto called. "Zoro-nii!"

"What if he's abandoned us?" Gaara asked shakily. What if the monster had been telling the truth? What if –

"He wouldn't do that!" Naruto quickly insisted, derailing Gaara's train of thought. "He wouldn't leave us, and we'll find him!"

After searching around the various rock formations, Zoro suddenly appeared again; almost as if he had come out of thin air.

"Where were you two?!" Zoro demanded from behind the boys, effectively startling both of them to such an extent that Naruto once again unwittingly activated the chakra in his feet and scaled one of the higher rocks, while Gaara encased himself in a globe of sand.

"Stop being ridiculous you two," Zoro scowled, annoyed at the two for wandering off.

It took a few minutes more to talk Gaara out of his sand globe. The redhead didn't look happy at all.

"You two shouldn't wander off," Zoro didn't look happy either.

"You're the one who disappeared!" Naruto shot back. Turning to Gaara, he added, "*See I told you, he gets lost!*"

"I don't get lost!"

"You're the one who left us, why are you mad that we couldn't find you?" Gaara stared at the ground. "Why are you mad at us? Did we do something wrong?"

"I...No...you didn't." Zoro started, but then he huffed, scratching the

back of his head. "The paths move sometimes... I must've gotten confused. My mistake."

While Naruto muttered about 'damn paths not moving' Gaara wondered at Zoro's current attitude. He seemed...annoyed? Worried? Gaara couldn't actually tell, but he remembered Yashamaru telling him that he should help people in their time of need. What was Zoro's current need? The moving pathways...and his confusion. After thinking for a moment, Gaara was pleased with himself when he thought of a solution.

Gripping Zoro's haramaki, Gaara mumbled, "We'll walk like this for a while, so you don't get lost." Green eyes met Zoro's silver ones. "Okay?"

Zoro scowled at being led around like a child by a child, but gave a resigned sigh. "Alright...We should keep moving."

Naruto led the way, and occasionally he would double-check the directions with Gaara, working together to make their way towards Kawa. Zoro silently stewed - he *didn't* get lost, dammit! It wasn't his fault that buildings and pathways and even *entire islands* moved, or that people's directions were confusing, or hell – even the maps he was given were completely inaccurate and a rip-off!

But for the first time, his unintended "wandering" had affected someone else in the worst way - two little kids had thought that he'd abandoned them in the middle of the f**kin' desert. Dammit, he needed to get to Kiri – sooner, rather than later would be preferable.

000

It had been a week since they had left Sunagakure; currently, they were resting on some benches outside a small restaurant in a town that was near the border of Kaze no Kuni and Kawa no Kuni. Zoro intended to head to the port in Kawa so that they would be spending as little time in Hi no Kuni as possible. They could just keep within the lower half of the downward region of Hi no Kuni, and hopefully avoid any Konoha-nin if they were still out searching for them. Considering just who Naruto was, they very likely were.

Since they had some time to relax, Zoro studied the two boys who were sitting across from him. The two were talking animatedly – well, Naruto was doing most of the talking, while Gaara leaned forward and listened in rapt attention. He occasionally nodded or shook his head, and every now and then he said something that somehow required an

incredibly longwinded answer from Naruto.

The incident a week ago with Gaara and the monster he contained caused some concern for Zoro. It was like an unexperienced kid swinging around a sharp sword at people not thinking that they would actually hit and hurt someone. Or worse, hurt themselves. While he had never been subject to it or knew someone personally that it happened to, Koshiro had told him that some swords could turn on the person that wielded them. Considering the fact that the monster Gaara held prevented him from sleep and also seemed to whisper in the back of his mind, that only made things even more complicated.

Over the past week, there were various times that Gaara would ask both Naruto and Zoro if they were angry at him or even hated him. It was as if the kid constantly needed some kind of reassurance that neither Zoro nor Naruto were going to abandon him – probably due to the sandy-raccoon's constant taunts and whispers. It was also during this time that Gaara learned something important about Zoro.

Zoro would wordlessly comfort them, scowl and complain, and yet... To Gaara, Zoro was an enigma. Gaara wondered if this is sort of how a family was supposed to be. He was very much aware that they were by no means conventional.

The teen would threaten both him and Naruto, yet never carry out his threats. Or the threats would be something half-hearted. He would give Naruto a light punch on the head whenever Naruto did something that irritated him; and Gaara in turn would receive a flick on the forehead. But then during their training, Zoro would smirk when he was pleased and ruffle both his and Naruto's hair. He would stay awake with Gaara into the early hours of the morning simply talking to him and listening to whatever Gaara had to say. It was also during one of these nights that Gaara learned Zoro could be somewhat scary.

Flashback

It had already been over two days since they had left Suna, and were now settling in for the night. Zoro stoked the campfire, making sure it wouldn't go out. He wasn't really that concerned with being cold, but the desert nights could reach near 0° and sometimes even in the negatives.

Although Naruto scowled as he curled up in his blanket, with a yawn he insisted, "But I'm not tired."

Both Gaara and Zoro gave Naruto a dull glance as just two seconds later, he was snoring away, completely dead to the world.

"Not tired, huh?" Zoro muttered. He sent a sideways glance at Gaara. "You should sleep, too. I'll keep watch."

"...I never sleep." Gaara stated. "The monster will eat my mind if I do."

"You *never* sleep?" Zoro quirked an eyebrow at that. He had just assumed Gaara went to sleep the night before, or at least had taken a nap when they stopped to rest. He certainly didn't envy the kid. Not being able to sleep, or hell – even drink sake – that would make life so unnecessarily difficult.

Standing, Zoro stretched and now gave Gaara a grin. "Well, how about we train for a bit? No point in just sitting around doing nothing."

"Train?" Gaara asked. "How?"

Zoro pulled out a scroll from his bag before answering. Releasing a pair of bokutō from the scroll, he said, "I actually wanna test the speed of your shield."

"But its fast enough already, isn't it?" Gaara reasoned. "It's always protected me without fail."

Gaara moved quickly to catch the sword that Zoro tossed to him. Although Gaara somewhat fumbled with it as he had caught it at an awkward angle, he didn't drop it. The weight Seals made it difficult to move, but Gaara managed; a fact that he was personally proud of.

"But you've never had to defend against *me*." Zoro reasoned back. "Always aim to improve and never settle for 'good enough', sand-brat."

Zoro got into position, instructing Gaara as he did. "Stand like this, and make sure to keep your feet in this position, otherwise you'll end up flat on your back."

Gaara quickly copied Zoro. "Like this?"

Wordlessly, Zoro used his sword to gently push one of Gaara's feet back a few inches. "Spread your feet a bit more. There ya go."

The two worked through a few slow and simple katas for almost an hour while Naruto snored. Zoro made sure that Gaara knew how to block, before getting into what he really wanted to try. He was going

to hold back, obviously – but he wished that Naruto was more open to taking risks and testing out what his abilities' limits were.

After Zoro felt that Gaara was ready, he smirked – the teen's facial expression should have made Gaara hesitate. But when Zoro said, "Very good, sand-brat," he somewhat blushed instead at the praise and returned a small smile.

"I'll tell you which direction I'm coming from, and control my strikes, so brace yourself whenever I'm coming at you, got it?"

"Yes."

Zoro charged forward "Forward strike!"

Gaara's sand blocked the sword, even though Gaara was prepared with his own sword. This process continued, with Zoro calling out where his attack was coming from until they had a pattern. Then, Zoro got down to business.

"I'm coming now for real, this time – get ready, Gaara!" Zoro got into position for when he used One Sword Style. "*Kai!*"

Zoro released one of his weight Seals and charged. He and Gaara went through the routine step-by-step, and Gaara's sand defended him every time. Zoro then forced Gaara to move, and still his sand kept up with him, blocking Zoro's attacks. After being forced to dodge and prepare to block a possible attack was tiring, and Gaara was really starting to notice the extra weight.

Never once did Zoro make contact with Gaara's weapon.

But then it happened.

"*Kai!*" Zoro released another of his weight Seals as he was coming in for a strike, doubling his speed at the last minute.

CLACK!

Zoro managed to strike through a thin layer of Gaara's sand, when it couldn't keep up with either the boy it was supposed to protect, or with the unexpected speed Zoro was capable of. Gaara's eyes widened in shock and even fear, because no-one had ever broken through his Ultimate Defense before. With one quick movement, Zoro gently tapped Gaara on the head with his sword. For once, the monster in his mind was surprisingly quiet, but Gaara didn't notice.

Turning to Zoro, who had been silent since he managed to break through Gaara's defense, the boy tentatively asked,

"...Are you mad that I wasn't able to keep up?"

"I'm not mad," Zoro replied, again wondering why Gaara would ask such a question. Frowning, Zoro flicked Gaara on the forehead. "Ask if I'm mad again and I'll double the weight on your Seals."

Gaara quickly nodded, but it appeared that Zoro wasn't done speaking. He tossed Gaara a water flask. "Anyway, I was thinking... We'll need to find a way to get you more sand, along with somehow increasing its response time – 'specially if you're moving."

Zoro motioned to Gaara, and they both settled down by the campfire. The teen laid back and laced his fingers behind his head. Zoro yawned before saying, "After finding you your sand, we'll be training like that in increasing amounts. You have an advantage when you're standing in one spot, but there may come a time when you don't have that luxury."

"Okay." Gaara nodded, not really registering the feral-yet-somehow-thoughtful smirk that Zoro was sending his way. The boy never really had been able to recognize and fully process what facial expressions meant – but in context Zoro was smiling (a good thing) and encouraging him even when he had failed and telling him where he needed to improve (another good thing) so that meant he must have done well.

In all honesty, it had terrified him when Zoro had broken through his defense. No-one had *ever* managed that before. Of course, no-one other than his uncle and his fa—Rasa, had ever *encouraged* him to use his sand, and now Zoro wanted him to get *more* sand.

"Can I call you 'Zoro-nii' too?" Gaara asked quietly.

Zoro snorted in surprise at the question. "Uh...don't see why not."

Gaara smiled somewhat – it was awkward, but he was pleased.

When Naruto realized that Gaara was more than willing to train with Zoro using the teen's heart-attack-inducing-crazy means, he was honestly irritated. While he had been hoping for an ally against Zoro's sadistic tendencies to test out their abilities and strength, it seemed that Gaara could be just as sadistic. With a heavy sigh, Naruto was starting to think that out of the three of them; *he* was somehow the

rational one.

****End Flashback****

Now, here they were – Zoro crossed his arms in thought. He still had those scrolls Kakashi had given him; and although his own Jutsu was rudimentary at best, he really shouldn't let them go to waste. Gaara was now also subject to Zoro's weight Seals, and for the past week he and Gaara had been training.

"Meditation would probably help..." Zoro muttered thoughtfully.

"Hey, kid."

The three looked up to a large man – thinning dark hair, beer belly, grungy clothing, scar over his right-side brow...his wide grin housed yellowing and crooked teeth, a few of which were missing. A soft breeze carried the man's scent downwind towards the trio, causing each of them to try and not react to the stench of stale alcohol and repugnant body odor. Gaara very much wanted to say something, but Yashamaru had told him it was rude to comment on the unpleasant aspect of a person's appearance or smell.

"Yeah?" Zoro croaked, trying not to breathe in too deeply.

"That there's one nice sword ye got." He motioned to Wado Ichimonji.

Immediately (more like instinctively) Zoro gripped his sword tightly as if it weren't already tied to his waist and pulled it even closer to his person. "It's not for sale or trade."

"Well, here's the thing," the man replied, "Us locals have a little competition once a week or so, and enterin's 'ntirely optional. All ye gotta do is put up an entrance fee of somethin' of value. Like that sword, or hell – even the sword the lil' squirt has."

Now Naruto gripped his sword as if the man had actually moved to try and take it from him.

"His sword's not for sale, either." Zoro said firmly.

"Justa suggestion's all I'm sayin'." The man put his hands up in a placating manner. "Lookee there," he motioned somewhere inside the restaurant, where a crowd had started gathering. They could see a table that had a growing pile of various weapons, money, clothing, and...Zoro's eye caught sight of a gourd nearly half the size of Gaara

that was marked with the character for 'sake', and in the mix of weapons and other junk, two decent-looking swords.

"That's the pot," the man continued, "and the victor takes the spoils. Although, as owner of this here fine 'stablishment, I keep ten percent of – "

"Actually," Zoro grinned. "When I win, you can keep all of it. There's only a few things there that I'm actually interested in."

Both Naruto and Gaara looked at Zoro in surprise.

The man frowned.

"Ye sound real confident in yerself, kid." He eyed Zoro doubtfully. "Don't go thinkin' ye can just throw in some random junk. We don't accept cash, Ninja weapons or tools; they're a crafty bunch. A few of 'em've put their payment in only for it to dis'ppear hours after they left; and we quit takin' money when most of it turned out to be really good forg'ries." The man sounded particularly bitter about that. "Only stuff like that sword an' other valuables are accepted."

Zoro eyed Wado Ichimonji for a moment before entering the restaurant and placing his sword onto the growing pile. He had no other options, so he just had to make sure he wouldn't lose.

"Zoro-nii, are you sure?" Naruto asked worriedly. "That sword is important to you!"

Zoro shrugged. "Well, I've made a few promises on that sword already; and if I lose it, it'll be the same as breaking those promises. I've never broken a promise, so I *can't* lose."

He wasn't willing to.

The competition consisted of almost thirty men – more than a few of which had no place competing at all; due to the fact they had little to no muscle – and a few women who could give the men a run for their money. There was an older woman with graying hair and a cigarette standing off to the side taking people's bets on the competitors.

Tables and chairs had been pushed against the walls and stacked atop each other. Spectators and competitors gathered around a table in the center of the room, while the first two competitors stood at the table. The first to compete was a large man and a woman who was no more than five feet tall. The man's eyes traced the woman's figure, and she

simply glared at him.

The man who had initially approached Zoro stood to the side, and with a loud voice called out, "Alright, ye bastards! I'm Otori, the owner and overseer of this occasion. I wanna good n' clean comp'tition, ye hear? That means no Jutsu: if ye use Jutsu durin' your match, ye get kicked out." He glanced in between the man and the woman, and raised his hand in the air. "Get ready..."

"You sure you want to do this, little girl?" the man asked, condescendingly.

The woman simply held up her hand. "Shut up and do this already."

The man grabbed the woman's hand and smirked as he whispered, "I could make you a very happy woman for one night. I'm also willing to pay, if it's money you want."

Otori's hand waved down. "Begin!"

In under ten seconds, there was the sound of bone snapping, and the man collapsed to the floor clutching his arm and screaming. The woman stared down at him coldly. She simply flicked her hair with a hand.

"As if you could ever hope to even handle a woman like me."

Someone helped the groaning man up and he was taken to have his arm looked at.

"Whoa..." Naruto whispered.

"She's rather scary..." Gaara agreed.

A few more rounds went by, and the short woman had won all of them so far. It seemed that breaking her first opponent's arm had worked in her favor. People were clearly hesitant to face her, and those that waited too long would soon be left with no choice but to either withdraw or lose.

Finally, Zoro stepped forward. The woman sized him up. Zoro was taller than her by only a foot. He was also the youngest participant she had faced so far.

Quirking an eyebrow, she asked, "You sure about this, kid?"

Zoro responded with his classic smirk. "Hm? Afraid you'll lose?"

Scowling, she got into position. "Cocky brat."

They gripped hands. Otori lifted his hand. "Ready...begin!"

Within five seconds, the back of the woman's hand hit the table. She looked at Zoro in bitter surprise. Nodding and admitting defeat, she stepped off to the side. A man with large muscles as thick as Naruto's waist now stepped forward, obviously thinking that a cocky teen managed to beat the woman because she was tired, along with being a female.

The man barely even lasted eight seconds before the back of his hand slammed into the table.

If Zoro were to be honest...he had released a few of the Seals suppressing his strength. This was *before* Otori had said something about no Jutsu or whatever, and it wasn't like he was using it on other people. He was *not* willing to part with Kuina's sword. The mere thought of her sword being wielded in the grubby hands of some of the people here caused him to lose focus and overexert himself, unwittingly breaking his third opponent's arm.

"...Sorry." Zoro scratched the back of his head. Damn, and he was using his right-hand, too.

As the matches continued, a few people tried to intimidate the teen, either by using subtle threats, derisive comments or their size; but that only resulted in Zoro breaking out in a feral grin that unnerved them. Clearly, the teen saw the threats and taunts as challenges, and more than gladly stepped up to meet them head-on.

An hour later, Zoro collected Wado Ichimonji, a pair of excellently-crafted swords, a large gourd that was filled with *expensive* sake (which was an absolute bonus in Zoro's mind) and... Zoro glanced down at some folded material stuck amongst the pile of loot. Picking it up, he examined the cloth; it was extremely long and thin – at least twenty feet if not more, and felt exceptionally durable.

Zoro smiled. "Perfect."

Zoro took a few more things that he thought might be of value later, and left behind a *very* happy Otori. After Sealing away everything except the sake, the three were on their way once again. Otori had been so happy with everything Zoro decided to leave behind, the man gave them some food for the road.

For Naruto, the snack foods that Otori had thrown in was an amazing bonus; and Gaara decided that he *really* liked dango.

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"Ahh!" Zoro was pleasantly buzzed as he drank his well-earned sake. "This is some damn fine booze!"

The sake was expensive, and had come from Ta no Kuni. It would have been an unpleasant surprise and a shame to the tiny yet profitable country known for the quality of their rice if the alcohol tasted the slightest bit off.

The two younger boys walked with him, carefully observing Zoro's every move. If Zoro got lost easily when he *wasn't* drunk, what was bound to happen when he *was*?

Zoro paused briefly, and then offered the gourd out to his two young wards. While he was not one to usually share his sake with people, he'd make an exception this time. "Wanna try some?"

Naruto's nose wrinkled at the smell, and Gaara furrowed his brow.

"A-aren't we underage? My uncle said I wasn't supposed to drink until I got much older..." but Gaara wouldn't deny that he was curious.

Zoro shrugged. "Don't have to, if you don't want to."

"I'll try it." Gaara accepted the offer.

Not to be outdone, Naruto accepted as well.

Holding the gourd for both boys as they each carefully took a small sip, the reactions were instantaneous. Of course, the sake was both bitter and sweet, and burned a bit as it went down. Naruto went into a coughing fit; and Gaara made a face as if Zoro had offered him juice, only for it to be a bitter medicine.

"How (*cough*) can y-(*cough, cough*) you drink that?!" Naruto demanded through a wheeze.

"I don't like it..." Gaara said apologetically. "...I'm sorry..."

Instead of being insulted, Zoro looked smug. "There, now you know what it tastes like, so no sneaking off with any of my sake." Briefly narrowing his eyes at them, he added, "I don't want you wasting it..."

"Don't want it!" Naruto retorted when he was finally over his coughing fit.

Gaara shook his head in agreement. "Please don't make me drink it again..."

It was *very* unpleasant.

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Around lunchtime they settled down for something to eat and get some much-needed rest. As they ate, Zoro wrapped the middle of the gourd with the material he had gotten from the winnings. After wrapping and tying the cloth to a certain point around the gourd, Zoro held it out from himself to admire his work. There was a section of loose cloth so that it could hang from the wearer's shoulder; figuring that it shouldn't hinder Gaara too much once he got used to it, and if it was somehow a hassle, Zoro could probably put some sort of weightless Seal on the thing. Another advantage to having the gourd was that not only was it a weapon, it served as another source of strength-training.

"Gaara, come over here," Zoro waved the red-head over.

Gaara walked up to Zoro, and the teen lifted the gourd's strap over Gaara's shoulder so that it was strapped sideways on his back. "There you go, now you have a place to put all your extra sand."

Gaara's eyes went wide. "You're giving this to me?"

"Yeah," Zoro mumbled through a bit of rice ball. "So do whatever you have to get more sand, and we'll get going when you're done."

"...Thank you." Gaara said with a shy smile.

Sitting down again, Gaara closed his eyes and concentrated on the sand around him. He began funneling his chakra into the sand, and the world around him disappeared as sand began swirling around him in small waves. The monster in his mind also began reaching for the sand, automatically funneling his own chakra in. Gaara ignored the monster's taunts and screams that sounded within the dark corners of his mind.

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Meanwhile, Zoro now turned his attention on Naruto. It would

probably take a few hours or so for Gaara to finish, so they might as well be productive.

"Naruto, come here." Zoro waved Naruto over. "Sit down – like this."

Naruto copied the lotus-style position. "It's not very comfy..."

"It'll help you focus."

"Okay...so what am I focusing on?"

"You're going to meet the Kyuubi." Zoro stated. Naruto started to protest, but one scowl accompanied by a quirk of the teen's eyebrow silenced him. "The Kyuubi and you are pretty much stuck with each other. Why not try and meet 'im? Some things would probably go easier if you learn to work together somehow, in time. S'why not get started now?"

Naruto looked hesitant, but Zoro simply said, "You can do this, brat."

"But Zoro-nii..." Naruto looked scared. "People hated me for a reason. They were *scared*. What if the Kyuubi does something? What if..."

Zoro ruffled Naruto's hair. "It'll be alright, Naruto. You're just meeting him. You could always just back out of your mind." Zoro thought for a moment before adding, "Besides, I'm here, so there's nothing to worry about."

Even though Zoro couldn't do anything if something compromised Naruto's Seal, but his comment did bring Naruto some comfort, so he nodded.

Listening to Zoro's instructions, Naruto closed his eyes and took deep breaths in and out. He emptied his mind of his doubts and fears, focused on the Fox's chakra, and Zoro's voice faded out. At first, he couldn't locate it; but then imagining that he was standing in the middle of a black void, there it was. A small, tendril of red chakra. Naruto slowly reached out for it, his fingers had barely brushed up against the tendril when suddenly, it felt as if Naruto was being yanked forward by his stomach.

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Naruto looked up, and for a second or two, he wasn't sure how he had come to be where he was. He was standing in an orange-tinted, flooded corridor filled with leaky pipes. Walking forward slowly,

Naruto eventually came upon what looked to be a large jail cell; locked simply by a piece of paper with elegant script scrawled across it.

"Well, well, well..." a deep voice caused shivers to go down Naruto's spine the moment he heard it. Red eyes appeared from behind the bars, and glared down at the boy. **"Looks like my jailer has finally come to pay me a visit."**

Sharp white teeth formed a malicious smile. Naruto couldn't move. He was terrified.

"Why are you here?"

"I-I-I..." Naruto squeaked out. "AHH!"

Sharp claws struck through the bars, unable to reach him, but Naruto could *feel* the absolute hatred and anger that was directed towards *him*.

"Come closer."

Naruto took a step forward, not by his own will.

"Don't you want to let me out?" the Fox purred. **"You'll have so much power."**

Naruto quickly pulled back, nearly losing his balance. "N-No!"

Frowning in obvious disapproval, the Fox asked, **"Then why are you here?"**

"Uhh..." Naruto prodded his index fingers together. The Fox's gaze was making him more and more nervous. "I just uh, w-wanted to m-meet you? I mean...we're stuck together an' all, so I thought m-maybe that-"

"As if I'd ever work with a fking weak little brat like you. GET OUT."**

Naruto was kicked out of his mind space by a terrifying invisible force.

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"AAHHHH!" Naruto shot up from where he was seated and fell backwards onto his rear, visibly shaking and tears at the corners of his eyes.

"Naruto?"

Naruto glanced up at a concerned Zoro. The boy suddenly launched himself at Zoro, silently crying.

"Please don't make me go in there again, Zoro-nii." Naruto begged.
"The Fox, he's...he..."

This...this was worse than Zoro thought. He placed a hand on Naruto's head. "You're gonna have to face him again at some point."

Naruto looked up at Zoro with wide, fear-filled eyes.

Sighing, Zoro got down on one knee so he could be at Naruto's level.
"He was scary?"

Nodding, Naruto told Zoro about the Fox, and how he had pulled him forward only to forcibly kick Naruto out.

"Then it's a battle of wills." Zoro said. "You'll have to take control – it's *your* mind and body he's in, after all."

Zoro made it sound so easy.

"But you're not the one who has to face him!" Naruto shouted. "You have *no idea* what it's like! *No wonder* people called me a monster! I don't want *anything* to do with that stupid Fox!"

"What's going to happen if you lose control?" Zoro asked plainly. "You remember what happened with Gaara?"

"I don't want to!" Naruto insisted stubbornly.

Zoro frowned before sighing. "...Fine. But sooner or later, you'll have to face the Fox again."

The teen stood and walked away ten feet or so, so that he could swing one of his oversized weights.

Naruto slumped on the ground, and placed a hand over his stomach. He felt sick. The Fox was terrifying – and given how Gaara described his own monster as 'eating his mind' Naruto was starting to understand and sympathize with Gaara.

/"Don't compare me with that stupid Tanuki."/

Naruto jolted at the sound of the Kyuubi's voice. It seemed to rattle

inside his head, thoroughly unnerving him even more. A cruel laugh echoed in his mind. The Kyuubi then suddenly went quiet, but Naruto *knew* that it was because the Fox put up his barrier. In a terrifying sense, *the Fox* was in control.

It went without saying; Naruto didn't get much sleep that night.

*O*O*O*

By the time dawn came, Gaara was finished filling the gourd with plenty of sand. He was already trying to think of ways he could utilize his sand in the ways Zoro expected him to.

Naruto was uncharacteristically quiet, but he had a smirk on his face when Zoro woke up.

"Zoro-nii, what happened to your face?" Gaara asked.

"Hmm?" Zoro blinked. He had a small mirror somewhere in his bag; and upon looking at his reflection, Zoro found that a certain someone had doodled all over his face with marker.

Naruto was now hiding his snickering, not realizing the annoyance that was radiating off of Zoro.

"Naruto..." Zoro growled out.

The blond burst out in laughter, unable to contain it any longer. Gaara glanced back and forth between the two in interest, but also worry. When Zoro moved towards him, Naruto made a spluttering noise and quickly started running while Zoro simply poured some water on a towel that was located in one of their bags and started cleaning his face.

Zoro muttered about 'stupid brats and their pranks' mixed with a number of obscenities. Gaara observed this in wide-eyed wonder. Sure, he already knew quite a few curse words thanks to his monster. Yashamaru once unwittingly cursed in front of Gaara and had spent a considerable amount of time telling Gaara a variety of excuses and explanations that went nowhere on why he shouldn't use such language.

But he had never heard quite the combination of words that Zoro was using, and he knew that if Yashamaru was here, he'd be reprimanding the teen for talking like he was in front of Gaara. Now, here Zoro was, cursing up a storm, not really caring he had two kids listening to him.

He could hear his monster's amused chuckles in the back of his mind.

Once he had cleaned up, Zoro just sat down and started eating a light breakfast.

"Sit your ass down and eat something, brat." Zoro called out to Naruto.

Naruto tentatively walked over and sat down next to Gaara. He picked up a rice ball suspiciously, watching Zoro. Nothing seemed wrong with his breakfast, so Naruto started eating. They ate in silence for a while, before Zoro spoke up.

"I was thinking last night..." Zoro said, eyes closed in thought. "Those Beasts of yours are like swords. Currently, they're sheathed, and won't listen to anyone; not even the only ones who can wield them. They've gotta be *given* respect, while you must *earn* their respect in return."

"What?" Gaara cocked his head, remembering Zoro had said something like that before. Still not really understanding, he asked, "My monster is like a sword? How so?"

"Yep," Zoro nodded once. "You pretty much have to *prove* you have the right to wield them. There are some swords that have to be tamed, but since your Beasts are alive, your approach to them must be different."

Naruto made a face. "But *I don't want* to...The Fox was terrifying!"

"That's exactly *why* you *have* to face him, Naruto. He's using your fear and hesitation to control you. Especially now."

"Different how?" Gaara asked.

"By finding a unique balance between you, whatever it is." Zoro shrugged. He held up Wado Ichimonji. "This sword belonged to someone else before it was given to me...I asked for it. But I proved to this blade I had the right and the conviction to wield it."

"You talk about the sword as if it's alive." Gaara said in interest.

"Alive, but not in the traditional sense."

"Um, uh...so...h-how *do* I-we talk to them?"

"What if the monster eats my mind?"

Pointing to Naruto, Zoro said, "Be calm and refuse to back down and don't show fear." Looking at Gaara, "The same goes for you. If your

monster doesn't listen, just put up some kind of barrier or something until you want to talk to him again."

Zoro made it sound so easy, something that Gaara pointed out.

"It's *your* minds, right?" Zoro gave a lazy shrug that didn't exactly inspire the confidence either of the boys had been hoping for. "I don't think either of you brats are giving yourselves enough credit. When you get shoved, you gotta shove back."

"...What do we even say?"

"Why not ask their names?" Zoro replied after thinking for a moment.

"You *actually* think the Fox and the Tanuki have *names*?" an incredulous Naruto questioned.

"Why wouldn't they?" Zoro answered as if it were the most obvious thing.

"I'll try it, I guess..." Gaara mumbled. He was obviously very nervous.

A few minutes passed before Naruto finally spoke up. "Okay...I'll try again."

Getting into the position required to meditate, the Jinchuuriki plunged into the depths of their minds.

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Gaara found himself standing in an endless green field, complete with an endless rainy gray sky. It could have been considered peaceful, if it were not for what was waiting for him there. Several feet away from where Gaara stood, was the monster of his mind: the Ichibi, surrounded by seven thick pillars several feet tall with numerous complicated glyphs carved into them. Several thin cracks covered various areas of the pillars, which wasn't exactly a comforting or reassuring realization. The Ichibi had large manacles on his neck, arms, legs and even his tail, with numerous thick chains attached to the pillars. The Ichibi was in a position where he could only move a few inches either way, if that.

Gaara took a deep breath to prepare himself.

The Ichibi cocked his head mockingly and grinned. "***Why, look who's come to pay mommy a visit!***"

Gaara furrowed his eyebrows. Logic dictated that the Ichibi had lied and twisted his words before, so why not now? "You-you aren't my mother..."

"Eh, it was worth a shot..." the Ichibi muttered bitterly. Suddenly, the Ichibi began thrashing around, causing the ground to shake. Gaara quickly moved to keep his balance. ***"LITTLE F**KING F**KER I SHOULD KILL YOU! RIP OUT YOUR F**KING EYES! CRUSH YOU! RIP YOU APART!"***

Gaara shivered. It was one thing to *hear* the monster; it was another thing entirely to *see* him.

The Ichibi stopped moving, and leaned towards Gaara as far as his chains would allow him – which wasn't much. ***"Won't you let me out, little Gaara?"*** the Ichibi purred in a soft, high-pitched tone. ***"Why not let me feast on the blood of that swordsman, or at least let me..."*** His tone became normal as he screamed, ***"F**KING KILL THAT DAMNED C**K-SUCKING FOX!"***

Not knowing how to respond to the tirade and trying to ignore his near-suffocating fear, Gaara asked, "...W-why do you want to k-kill everything?"

The Ichibi looked at Gaara as if he were an idiot.

"That's a f*cking stupid question, little boy. It should be f**king obvious."

Gaara apparently didn't understand, and required further explanation.

"THOSE MOTHER-F**KING-BASTARDS LOCKED ME UP! STOLE EVERYTHING! F*CKING DESTROYED IT!"

Trying not to wince at Ichibi's screaming, Gaara quietly asked, "Who?"

Deflecting the question, Ichibi asked in that soft, high-pitched tone, ***"Don't you want to go to sleep, Gaara?"*** In a sing-song voice, he added, ***"So tired, ri~ght?"***

Gaara sighed at Ichibi's uncooperativeness. A powerful headache was starting to form, and for once it wasn't from Ichibi screaming in his mind; but rather frustration because of Ichibi. Searching for something to say, Gaara asked,

"D-do you have a name?"

"AS IF I'D EVER TELL YOU, YOU MOTHER-FKING, C*CK-SUCKING LITTLE BRAT!"**

Gaara flinched, staring at the ground. He took in another deep breath, forcing himself to concentrate and not react any further. "...Okay."

Zoro had told him to form "some kind of barrier in between them" if Ichibi refused to cooperate. But he decided to try once more. Shove back when you get shoved, right?

"Ichibi?" Gaara said quietly. "I-I'd like for-for us to s-somehow get along—"

"I'D RATHER FKING RIP YOU APART FROM THE INSIDE OUT!"** Ichibi screamed, thrashing once again.

Now, Gaara actually took three steps back, before standing there with his shoulders limp. This conversation (if it could even be called that) wasn't really going anywhere.

"...Alright then."

Ichibi glared suspiciously at Gaara, wondering what the pathetic little brat was up to. He thought that surely, the boy would leave after that, but he was just standing there.

Gaara thought back to what Ichibi had said earlier about sleep. If sleep was what the Ichibi wanted, then sleep is what Ichibi shall have. Gaara extended a hand out towards the pillars, and focused on the rain. He began imagining the rain as a water sphere that encircled the Ichibi.

"Hey...what...WHAT THE FK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"** Ichibi screeched. He began thrashing, cursing, demanding and taunting. Ichibi even threw in some whines and pleaded for Gaara to stop whatever it was he was doing.

It was a slow process, because the Ichibi kept trying to get to Gaara. Yes, Gaara was terrified. But the drive to no longer have Ichibi screaming and taunting him to practically no end, to have peace *for once*, and wanting to make Zoro proud, Gaara forced himself to ignore everything and focus.

Gaara didn't trust his voice to not reveal how scared he actually was, so he mumbled, "Sleep, Ichibi."

"AS IF I WOULD EV-"

Ichibi was cut off when the water sphere completed its formation, and slowly, Ichibi's eyes closed into a sound sleep.

Gaara sighed heavily, and looked around. The sky was still gray, but right now, Gaara felt some semblance of *mental* peace. Which felt odd, if he were to be honest. He couldn't remember his mind ever being this quiet. Knowing he would return here soon enough, Gaara closed his eyes in concentration, and allowed himself to be pulled back to the physical realm.

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"Back again, I see." The Fox growled upon seeing Naruto for the second time in two days.

Naruto clenched a fist, and pointed at the Fox with his other hand, demanding, "What's your name?!"

The Fox blinked at Naruto's blatant disrespect before narrowing his eyes. ***"As if I'd ever tell you, you little brat."***

Scowling, Naruto remembered what Zoro said about swords needing to be respected, so Naruto tried another approach. His idea of respect was to yell,

"Hey, you stupid Fox! My name is Uzumaki Naruto! I'd like the honor to know your name! So I'm gonna earn it! I'll show you! I'll show you that I have the right to wield you, just like a powerful sword! I mean it! One day, you'll tell me your name, Dattebayo!"

The Fox found himself honestly stunned into silence before laughing. It had been hundreds of years since he had laughed like this. But just because the kit made him laugh didn't mean he still wasn't bitter.

"A sword, huh? Is that what I am to you, a weapon to be wielded? You foolish Humans are all the same."

"Well, that's what Zoro-nii called you..." Naruto scratched the back of his head, ignoring the feelings of resentment and anger that washed over him, making his skin tingle uncomfortably. "He uh, said that you an' the Tanuki were like powerful swords that needed to be respected, and that I needed to earn the right to use your power, or somethin'."

That was honestly a new one for the Kyuubi. All of his past hosts had

essentially demanded that he *give* them his power; but never had anyone thought to *earn* it. A distant, forgotten memory of a man flashed in Kyuubi's mind before it was gone as quickly as it had come. This Zoro...was an interesting one, but Kyuubi was not willing to cooperate. Humans had put him here, and to be stuck at the whims of a little brat whose mother had contained him and father had taken half of his power and put him here...

"Leave."

"But why? I just got here, Dattebayo!" Naruto complained.

"I SAID GET OUT!"

Naruto felt a pulse of energy trying to shove him out, but Naruto pushed against it. Forcing his way forward, Naruto glared at the Kyuubi. With determination, Naruto shouted, "You and me, we're gonna be friends, ya hear?! Our names will shake the world, Dattebayo!"

Grinning, Naruto ignored Kyuubi's irritated glare. "I'll be back later, okay?"

Naruto then disappeared, leaving behind a thoroughly annoyed Kyuubi who knew he now had a series of a boisterous blond brat's visits to not look forward to.

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Naruto came to a short time before Gaara did. Opening his eyes, Naruto took a series of deep breaths, relieved that it would be a while before having to face the Kyuubi again. It was then Gaara opened his eyes, and sighed.

The redhead started to stand, saying, "Ichibi doesn't want-"

Gaara suddenly collapsed forward, and Naruto caught him before he could face-plant in the dirt.

"Gaara? Gaara!" Naruto shouted worriedly.

Zoro was next to the two boys within seconds, questioning what happened.

"Zoro-nii, he was fine! Then he suddenly fell! What's wrong with him?!"

Zoro positioned Gaara so that he was on his back, and then frowned in bemusement. "He's asleep..."

"Wha...*asleep*?"

Sure enough, Gaara was snoring softly. At first, Zoro felt concern, because Gaara had said that he *didn't* sleep because of his monster. But, if Gaara had gotten back from seeing his monster only to fall asleep like this, then had something gone right? Well...whatever. Nothing in particular seemed to be happening, and Gaara wasn't seeping any of that weird, chaotic energy.

"Let's get going, I'll just carry him." Zoro stated, and after packing everything together, he hoisted Gaara up under his right arm, gourd and all.

Naruto checked the map three times over, and confirmed that they were indeed just over the border of Kawa.

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They were only an hour or two away from reaching the port town, and were walking through a dense forest. From where they were, rushing water could be heard. Never having seen such tall and thick trees before, Naruto was absolutely captivated.

Gaara came to almost four hours later, obviously somewhat confused. He had just gotten out of his trance-state only to *fall asleep* and wake up somewhere else. After marveling at the trees and the river they were following for the first hour after waking up, Gaara was expressing his confusion as he walked with his companions.

"But I never sleep, because of the monster," was the only thing he could say which he fully believed expressed his confusion, and was also the only argument he needed to state said confusion.

"Well..." Naruto looked thoughtful. "What'd ya do when ya talked to him?"

"He screamed and cursed at me, and wouldn't listen, so I put up a barrier of water from the rain."

"Oh, yours is different? Wow! Mine's some kinda flooded hallway with leaky pipe and bars."

"Really? My monster is chained in between pillars in the middle of a

grassy field with a rainy sky."

Zoro listened in on the boys' conversation with some amusement. Perhaps when Gaara suddenly no longer had his monster keeping him awake, then Gaara –

It was probably by sheer dumb luck that Zoro sensed the attack. He couldn't explain how, but he felt it coming. Zoro immediately grabbed Naruto's collar and Gaara by the sash tied around his gourd and dodged by using a flipping and twisting motion to the side that moved them nearly eight feet back from where they initially started.

It was a completely unfamiliar sensation to the boys; it felt as if they were forcefully being squeezed through a very tight space, all while the world twisted around them.

"I think I'm gonna be sick..." Naruto gagged, trying not to lose his lunch.

"Whyza groun' doin' up there?" Gaara slurred, even though they were perfectly right-side up.

Zoro landed on a thick tree branch and briefly checked for their enemy before turning to the two boys. He cocked an eyebrow. "What's with you two?"

Both Naruto and Gaara looked a little green and shaky.

"What'ver you did, Zor-nii..." Gaara closed his eyes, attempting to will the spinning sensation to stop without much success. "'S'not pleasant..."

"What do you mean? What'd I do?" Zoro was genuinely confused. "I just dodged."

Unless...Zoro hadn't realized how his ability could affect other people. *He* had always been fine. Before Zoro could think on it further and either of the boys could respond, an unfamiliar voice interrupted them.

"Well, that was impressive."

They all turned to face a man who was probably only a few years older than Zoro. Tall and slender, short, dark hair, and a grin that housed pointed teeth. He wore a Kiri headband – no scratch through it, Zoro noted – and had bandages wrapped around his neck and ears.

The most notable thing about him was a weird, red-lined tattoo across the lower half of his face and an X-shaped scar on his right cheek. He held a long, thin sword over his shoulder; his casual stance wasn't enough to make Zoro lower his guard.

Zoro glared. "Who the hell are you?"

"Biwa Juzo," the man replied, smirking, "and you're Roronoa Zoro. Although, I was under the impression you had three swords?"

Zoro couldn't help but wonder how this Biwa guy recognized him. Yeah, by now his hair-dye was fading, but it still didn't stand out.

Zoro unsealed his two extra swords, as he could feel the bloodlust coming from Biwa. Zoro could tell that he would need to use all three of his swords here – about damn time, he had been itching for a fight for a long while now! He stood and tied them next to Wado Ichimonji. Zoro would certainly have to admit, the feeling of a decent fight was exciting – intoxicating even.

"Zoro-nii..." Naruto said worriedly, while Gaara glared daggers at the intruder that'd dare attack Zoro.

But, Zoro had to remember: he had two brats to look after, along with fulfilling his promises. He couldn't exactly mess around, especially with this guy. Turning to Naruto and Gaara, Zoro started saying, "Listen to me carefully, Gaara, put up a shield—"

When he was cut off.

"I wouldn't worry about those brats of yours if I were you, Roronoa!" Juzo yelled as he looked on in amusement. He swung his sword in a vertical slash, calling out, "*Suiton: Mizu setsudan gijutsu!*"

Zoro was forced to grab the two boys and dodge. A wall of sand shot up around the three intercepting the attack, which split the attack in two; propelling the strike to go off kilter and into the surrounding trees. Birds screeched in protest in the distance as they left their roosts. Zoro moved again, using Gaara's shield as a cover, this time purposefully focusing on where he wanted to go – which was down in an area that was out of the way.

There was that uncomfortable squeezing feeling for the two Jinchuuriki again, but it wasn't as bad as last time, since Zoro took into account that he was purposefully transporting more than one person. He spread an even layer of chakra over them to match his own

and moved. It was like the scenery around them faded out and back into existence somewhere else. Setting the pair down at the base of a tree, Zoro pointed at them, "Stay here until I come back, and Gaara – keep your shield up, you hear?"

Both boys' eyes widened.

"Let us fight with you, Zoro-nii," Gaara started to argue, but he shut his mouth when Zoro gave him a firm look.

"This is my fight, sand-brat. Besides, it's too dangerous."

"But we can help you fight!" Naruto protested, but Zoro simply pointed at him and then pointed at the ground where he was sitting.

"What part of 'too dangerous' do you not understand, Naruto? Stay here."

But of course, neither of the boys could really do anything, not just yet anyway. If anything, they'd be a hindrance, but that didn't stop them from wanting to help, somehow. They watched as Zoro took a purposeful step forward and simply faded out of their sight. So *that's* why Zoro was so hard to find when he randomly disappeared! What kind of Jutsu was that?

"What if he doesn't come back?" Gaara asked quietly as his shield rose up around him and Naruto.

Naruto had been biting his lip to the point that he was bleeding, but he hadn't noticed. "He'll be fine..." he finally noticed the blood and wiped it away with the back of his hand. "Zoro-nii'll be fine."

After thinking for a moment, Gaara said, "I want to know what's going on."

Naruto didn't hesitate to agree. But he still had to point out what Zoro said to them. "He said to stay here, so..."

"Well, if we move slightly to the left or to the right within the general proximity of *this* tree, then we *aren't* disobeying Zoro-nii, right?"

"Good point, let's go."

So carefully, keeping the shield in place, the two moved to a place where they could observe the fight. And possibly intervene if and when it was necessary.

Juzo watched with some fascination as Zoro and the two boys simply disappeared using what he assumed to be a shunshin and that strange sand. That was a pretty impressive one, he hadn't seen one quite like it before. And Zoro hadn't even used a hand seal! His skill was certainly living up to what he had heard, and he and Zoro hadn't even started yet!

Zoro suddenly appeared on his left, and Juzo quickly blocked. Zoro was only using one of his three swords. Testing him, perhaps?

"I'd recommend using all of your swords and every Jutsu available to you, Roronoa." Juzo said with a laugh. "You're going to need all the help you can get."

Zoro smirked. "We'll see."

Juzo made a hand Seal, "*Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu!*"

Five clones appeared out of globs of water from the river, and each charged at Zoro from various directions blades ready to strike. Zoro was stabbed through with six different blades before bursting into a puddle. Juzo smirked, knowing it wouldn't be that easy.

Zoro climbed out of the river about twenty feet away, relieved that he hadn't become a pincushion. That had been a *really* close call. Looking around carefully, Zoro spotted a cut-up log, and silently thanked Juzo for the artillery.

Juzo's eyes briefly widened when a large log from one of the trees he had sliced was thrown at him. It dispelled his clones, and Juzo easily cut through it, only to see Zoro charging at him with his three swords drawn. Juzo had to admit his surprise – he'd been curious about how Zoro wielded three swords, and he was amused at the teen gripping a sword in his mouth.

"*Oni Giri!*"

Zoro's swords clashed with Juzo's, and Juzo winced slightly when the sword in Zoro's mouth nicked his shoulder. He was now curious what technique that was – it wasn't even a Jutsu.

With a powerful swing of his sword, Juzo shouted, "*Suiton: Suidan no Jutsu!*"

Numerous water bullets fired at Zoro, who simply cut through them within seconds, but Zoro missed a few that nicked his arms, shoulders, and even his cheek.

Charging forward to strike, Juzo faked going one direction and when Zoro prepared to block and counterattack, he was struck on the back from above, thanks to a clone Juzo had created earlier. Zoro quickly moved one of his swords to block the rest of the attacks from above and next him, and grimaced when he got cut more than once. Fortunately, his blades had absorbed the brunt of the attacks and it wasn't serious enough to be a concern.

Jumping back from Juzo and ignoring the blood that dripped from his shoulder, part of his back and side, Zoro grinned as he temporarily stabbed his blades into the ground and pulled his bandanna off of his arm to tie it around his head.

"What's this?" Juzo asked. Juzo was in for another surprise as Zoro easily spoke around the sword in his mouth.

"You've got my attention. If it's a fight you want, it's a fight you'll get." Zoro then made a hand seal. "*Kai!*"

Releasing a weight Seal and one of his strength-repressing Seals, Zoro quickly grabbed his swords and prepared to fight once more. Juzo created more water clones, and this time Zoro didn't bother with a clone. He simply took a step backwards from the clones and disappeared into thin air. Juzo's eyes widened in surprise. That *wasn't* a shunshin, and the technique seemed familiar...*where* had he heard of it before?

He didn't have time to dwell on it however, as Zoro came at him from above. "*Tora Gari!*"

The appearance of a tiger appeared behind Zoro, as he executed the technique, surprising Juzo. He had never seen or even heard of an attack like this. While Juzo was able to block; the brunt force of the attack forced him back quite a bit with his feet leaving trails in the dirt. Not even pausing for a second, Zoro's body suddenly flashed so that he was now upside down and slightly leaning towards Juzo. "*Tora Nagashi!*"

Juzo jumped back, but he wasn't quick enough. He could *see* the sharpness and power behind Zoro's blades as he came in for the strike.

"Ugh!" Juzo grunted in pain when one of Zoro's swords sliced through

his stomach. The wound wasn't deep enough to be a concern, but he had only gotten lucky that it wasn't deeper. Juzo grimaced, but he would have to admit that even though this fight had barely started, it was an interesting one.

Their blades clashed a few more times, creating sparks between their blades. The two clashed once more, swords pushing against the other; trying to overpower each other. But both swordsmen were unrelenting.

Attempting to distract Zoro, Juzo released a sudden wave of Killing Intent, and Zoro froze. It was at that moment Juzo discovered that some of the rumors he had been hearing about Zoro being a demon were true. Because barely even a second passed before Zoro gave Juzo a predatory grin, undoubtedly looking forward to whatever Juzo could possibly dish out. Meanwhile, both Gaara and Naruto shivered upon feeling the Killing Intent, noticing that Zoro didn't seem to be bothered at all.

Juzo honestly felt himself getting excited as well. Zoro may be a demon as some people thought to call him; but Juzo was from the Bloody Mist. For a kid who came out of nowhere, he was delightfully proving to be a challenge. Juzo was sure that if he could bring back Zoro's head, then surely he would get an honorary position as one of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist. This had been his goal since he was a child and first heard of the legendary group.

Juzo smirked. There was plenty of water surrounding them, and he still had the chakra to spare. "*Kirigakure no Jutsu!*"

He charged towards Zoro, and sliced through open air where Zoro had been not even a second before. The first question that popped into Juzo's mind was what Zoro had done, followed by *where* he had gone. A flash of movement was caught of his peripheral as Juzo was looking over his shoulder. Zoro was suddenly *behind* him! Quickly, Juzo moved to parry.

Zoro was behind him for a few seconds, only to reappear just inches from his right. This was confusing, because one well-aimed swing right then, and Juzo was sure that the injury would have been serious if not fatal. Why hadn't Zoro taken advantage then?

Zoro's entire body went into a powerful spin as he shouted, "*Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu!*"

Gusts of wind whipped around him, slicing through the trees and

tearing up the ground. The move was erratic, but it did its job in forcing Juzo to dodge and substitute himself with a log that was turned into kindling soon after. That move was somehow familiar... Juzo tried to remember. Hadn't some sort of Konoha Kenjutsu-Nin been famous for specializing in such deadly moves years ago? He had been a man who reached legendary status even in Kiri for his genius with a sword, only to go into early retirement.

Zoro's attack pretty much made a clearing of the forest around them, causing the mist to dissipate. The mist cleared away, showing just how much destruction actually surrounded them.

"Things are getting interesting..." Making a hand sign, Juzo called out, "*Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu!*"

He created five more clones, and that was when he heard movement coming from behind him. Zoro was suddenly *there*, ducking low and grinning up at him only to suddenly fade out and appear in front of him.

"*Suiton: Suiben!*"

While Juzo may not have had the lightning affinity for sending an electric pulse through the whips he created, the technique did a damn fine job of holding someone in place while he killed them. Numerous water whips wrapped around Zoro, and all of the Juzo raised their swords to strike.

"*Enbima Yonezu...*" Juzo was forced to jump away when it looked like Zoro's swords were rippling, and there was a distinct metallic hum in the air. A red-eyed wraith-like creature rose above them, and spread out its flowing cloak. "*Oni Giri!*"

The strike left behind trails of energy as it sliced through Juzo's clones and he was lucky to block what and when he did. Glancing at the glowing blue trails of energy tracing the gashes along the trees and ground, Juzo narrowed his eyes at Zoro.

"What was that just now?" There was something bothering him. "With those techniques, you could have killed me, twice. Instead, you opted to attack from the front, prolonging our fight."

Zoro smirked. "Don't you know? Scars on the back are a swordsman's shame."

Juzo laughed. "What? Isn't that some sort of Konoha-Nin philosophical

bullshit?"

That begged the question of if Zoro *knew* of Konoha's swordsman, considering the attack that he had done.

"So what if it is?" Zoro asked, not seeming to care that Juzo was essentially mocking Konoha.

"You're a curious one, Roronoa Zoro." Juzo said, noting the fact. He could tell that he was tiring, but that had to mean that Zoro was tiring too. He had to end this. "You have the foolish beliefs of Konoha yet you fight like a ruthless Mist-Nin."

Zoro smirked. "Whenever I fight, I'd much rather know I won with skill, rather than with some underhanded bullshit."

"That way of thinking is what's going to kill you here today!"

"The only thing killing me is my boredom thanks to your yammering."

With a smirk, Juzo disappeared into a puddle, while Zoro released another weight Seal. Zoro spun around in time to block an attack from behind. Zoro silently cursed Juzo...Most Shinobi had no honor. Two more of Juzo's clones suddenly appeared (Zoro wasn't sure when he had created them, but whatever) and one performed rapid hand signs then shouted, "*Suiton: Suikōtoppa!*"

Zoro was assaulted with a torrent of water that felt like hundreds of punches to his gut and sides at once. Seconds later, the second clone followed the attack of the first, not giving Zoro any time to recover. Using the nearby water, Juzo's clone called out, "*Suiton: Suigadan!*"

Zoro was attacked from one side by Juzo himself, preventing him from dodging the oncoming attack. Five torrents of water slammed ruthlessly into Zoro, and if it weren't for the fact that he had Wado Ichimonji clamped in his teeth Zoro would have screamed out in pain. He was thrown to the ground and rolled a few feet before slamming into a tree, knocking the wind out of him.

"Damn..." Zoro gasped. That Juzo bastard hit f**king hard. The world was a blurry mess of swirling blackness and stars thanks to the pain and blood loss. Hitting his head against a tree certainly didn't help things.

"It's over, Roronoa Zoro." Juzo declared, readying his blade to cut off Zoro's head. "You were a worthy opponent."

Juzo swung his blade downwards.

This was it, huh. He was going to die... A childish voice rung out in his ears.

"Promise me! One day, either you or me will be the greatest swordsman in the world!"

Zoro opened his eyes. *Move.* He ordered his body. The world was sliding slowly by in blue-gray hues around him, or maybe he was just moving through it really fast? Zoro couldn't tell. One moment, Juzo was above him swinging that sword of his, and he could hear someone yelling his name. The next, Zoro was right next to Juzo, and the world flashed into color.

"Gazami Dori!" The aura of a large crab appeared behind Zoro as he unleashed the attack.

Shocked at Zoro's sudden burst of speed, Juzo barely blocked the attack. How...his blade had been literally *centimeters* from cutting off Zoro's head, only for him to somehow slide out from under it. Any other method of escape would and should have resulted in Juzo's victory.

"Kirigakure no Jutsu!" Juzo called out, quickly widening the distance between him and Zoro. He had to think of another tactic and quickly! Zoro's sudden burst of energy was something Juzo didn't think was possible due to the state he was in.

Zoro had a predatory grin on his face that made him look all the more menacing when accompanied by blood. Undeterred by the mist, Zoro charged, blades at the ready.

While Zoro charged forward through the mist, Juzo's mind was racing. The mist wasn't slowing Zoro down one bit. The cover might as well not even be there. Juzo didn't have much of a chance to wonder about it when he realized that Zoro was nearby. Coming at him from his right!

"Suiton: Mizu setsudan gijutsu!"

Juzo swung his blade, sending the attack towards Zoro. At this distance, it would be impossible for him to dodge such an attack... only for Zoro to suddenly appear on his *left* side, avoiding the attack completely. He was like a ghost... Juzo's eyes widened in realization. Impossible!

"Hyakuhachi Pondo Ho!"

Zoro performed a circular swing that launched three air compressed projectiles spiraling towards Juzo at close range. Juzo knew he wouldn't be able to dodge, and trying to block such an attack this close was useless.

Even though he attempted to block the attack, Juzo was thrown backwards in a violent twisting motion that sent him flying back several feet, losing his sword somewhere in the process. He hit the ground hard and rolled a few feet more before finally coming to a stop. His body could no longer move. Looks like this forest would be his grave. On the bright side, at least he was dying a warrior's death, and against someone like Zoro, no less.

Sensing Zoro's approach, Juzo smiled, accepting his fate. "Heh...looks like...this is the end, huh?"

"You were a worthy opponent." Zoro replied, removing his bandana. Collapsing to the ground in a sitting position thankfully, he continued. "You fought well."

Juzo laughed before it turned into a coughing fit. Once he was able to breathe again, Juzo said, "I thought your clan had died out a long time ago..."

Because he was dying, Zoro saw no harm in not denying the fact.

"Hmm? You know them?"

Juzo didn't answer, instead he replied, "Before I died...I'm glad to have gotten the chance to fight you, *Kiri no Yuurei*."

Mere seconds later, the light left his eyes as Juzo breathed his last.

Sighing tiredly, Zoro smirked, "I should be thanking you...you helped me learn more about my abilities."

Thinking back on the last part of the fight when the world around him drifted by in blue-gray hues, it had been the first time he had ever used that technique. How and why had he done it? Could he repeat it easily? If he could just learn to use it consistently, that'd be great.

Zoro swayed where he sat before collapsing into unconsciousness.

Chapter End Notes

BOOM Translations

Juzo:

Suiton: Suikōtoppa - Water Release: Water Shark Jutsu

Suiton: Suigadan – Water Style: Water Fang Bullet

Suiton: Mizu setsudan gijutsu – Water Style: Water Cutting Technique

Mizu Bunshin no Jutsu – Water Clone Jutsu

Suiton: Suidan no Jutsu – Water Bullet Jutsu

Kirigakure no Jutsu – Hiding in Mist Jutsu

Suiton: Suiben – Water Style: Water Whip Jutsu

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Zoro:

Oni Giri – Oni Cutter

Enbima Yonezu Oni Giri – Charm Demon Sleepless Night Oni Cutter

Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu – Demon Cannon Wind Cutting Jutsu

Hyakuhachi Pondo Ho – Hundred Pound Phoenix/Cannon

Tora Gari – Tiger Hunting

Tora Nagashi – Blade Wolf Stream/Flowing

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Kiri no Yuurei: Fog/Mist Ghost

Kekkei Genkai! Zoro confirmed! Zoro uses a mix of various Jutsu and his own attacks. More about the Clan and how Zoro's abilities work coming soon! I hope that the fight was decent – I really wanted to convey what I could see in my head into words. I also hope that I'm not rushing things with the Tailed Beasts, but I also don't want to drag things out with them.

So, Zoro is a bit stronger in this story than he was at the start of canon. The Elemental Nations'll do that to a person.

Arm wrestling injuries are a thing and they are brutal. Torn ligaments, broken bones... don't get hurt if you decide to arm wrestle, people.

Simply sleeping isn't Exactly the Recommended Road to Recovery, But Okay

Chapter Summary

After Zoro's fight, Naruto and Gaara make their way to a nearby town so he can recover. They disguise themselves, but the old inn-keeper is a shrewd woman and a Kunoichi's training never really goes away. Meanwhile, Jiraiya is hunting for the kid who took his godson and makes some startling revelations.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the kudos <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Thinking back on the last part of the fight when the world around him drifted by in blue-gray hues, it had been the first time he had ever used that technique. How and why had he done it? Could he repeat it easily? If he could just learn to use it consistently, that'd be great.

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*O*O*O*

Both Naruto and Gaara hated sitting on the sidelines as Zoro fought some guy who suddenly appeared and demanded to challenge him. Of course, the confrontation allowed the boys to see what exactly Zoro was capable of.

"See, I *told* you Zoro-nii was amazing!" Naruto bragged as if he had known all along what Zoro was capable of, and didn't have to be worried at all.

Gaara chose not to point out this fact, and rather focused on Zoro. When the mist rolled in and they were blinded, they could *feel* the power behind the Ninja and Zoro's attacks; from the rumbling in the ground, to pressure in the air itself. In order to know what was going on, Gaara closed his eyes and concentrated. Naruto watched curiously when an eyeball formed in Gaara's palm.

Gaara then willed the eyeball to float above the fight while he did his best to describe what was going on. His skill with creating the eye was

still a little over average, and his vision using the eye could only be described as being able to see the grains of sand constantly shift over the image. It was supposed to look much smoother, and Gaara hoped to reach that point soon.

He described what he was seeing to Naruto as best he could, and Naruto listened with rapt attention. When the point in the fight came where Zoro appeared to be defeated and about to be killed by Juzo's sword, Gaara couldn't help but cry out, "*ZORO-NII!*"

Nearly losing his concentration on the eye, Gaara was prepared to attack, but then Zoro did *something*. It was as if one second he was lying on the ground, and the next blink-and-you'll-miss-it second, Zoro was right next to Juzo. And then Zoro defeated his opponent, only to collapse a minute later.

So now, Gaara and Naruto found themselves in the woods with a passed-out, bloody Zoro, a dead body, and still an hour or so away from where they needed to be. Both Jinchuuriki boys quickly ran to Zoro's side.

"What are we going to do?" Gaara asked, looking worriedly at Zoro.

Thinking for a moment, Naruto replied determinedly, "We'll just take him ourselves. He probably needs a doctor." He then looked at the body. "What about him, though? I don't feel right just leaving him..."

Gaara walked up to the body and out of curiosity, pulled off the Kiri hitai-ate, inspecting it. It had Kirigakure's symbol, of course – but the hitai-ate's material was black instead of blue, and more fabric was used when making it so that the ends were much longer; instead of the average bandana size he was used to seeing in Suna. He then turned his attention to the body. Pondering on what he should do, Gaara then decided that the best option was to simply turn the body into a fine pulp within seconds using "*Sabaku Kyuu*."

"That's not what I meant!" a disturbed Naruto shouted, while grossed out, he was mostly mortified at the treatment of the deceased. The blond was thinking that they would just bury the man and be on their way. There also may have been a bit of superstition on his part thinking that Juzo would probably haunt them now; or at least, Gaara. Hopefully if the man's spirit *did* come back, only Gaara would be subject to his haunts.

"Well...there's evidence of a fight..." Gaara mumbled, as he tried to explain himself. "I mean, people are looking for you and Zoro-nii,

right? Wouldn't it be best if no-one found out who was fighting here?"

"Good point," Naruto couldn't disagree. Sighing, he looked towards the direction they needed to head. "We should go..." Naruto paused to look at his friend. "How good are you at henging?"

"I-I can get by well enough..."

"Good. We'll need disguises."

This was a fact that was very true – because someone might attack two kids and a wounded teen; the inn at the port where they were headed probably wouldn't rent out to two kids even *if* their older brother was injured, plus, Zoro hadn't wanted to be recognized with his three swords and green hair. Gaara took the late Juzo's hitai-ate and stuffed into his shirt and then retied Zoro's bandana around his head, hiding his hair. That was enough of a disguise for him, right?

Gaara was hesitant to use his sand in any way to carry Zoro, so that left them with pretty much dragging the much-bigger teen. The two were able to figure out where they were easily enough, and set on their way. It took much longer than two hours for them to get to their destination, but they managed well enough.

Once the town was in view, Naruto hinged into an older girl in her teens with long red hair while his whiskers remained. He allowed the form to be a bit bigger in the chest area, as he had learned from an unwitting Third Hokage (among others) about the attractiveness/dangerous wiles of women and how much they exposed when wearing certain kinds of clothing.

"Naruto...can I ask...why are you a girl?"

"This form comes to me the easiest, plus it's so funny!" Naruto explained. The truth was, Naruto was emulating his mother. After hours of staring at her picture, it just was a chance to connect with her. Flashing Gaara a grin, he/she continued, "I'm Naruko! Nice to meet'cha!"

Gaara only nodded, accepting the answer. He then hinged into an older teen boy with black hair and blue eyes – which were made all the more striking due to the fact he retained the black circles around his eyes. Gaara took the two swords that Zoro had won and tied them to his own waist, cutting out another possible identifier for them.

After giving each other a once over on their disguises, they headed

into the village. Upon entering the small fishing village, people gave them a wide berth. It was likely due to Gaara's intense gaze, or even a bleeding Zoro; maybe even a combination of both.

The inn was easy enough to find, and Mayumi the innkeeper gave them each a wary glance as they entered. The older woman didn't want trouble, and although she couldn't see any sort of village association with the odd trio before her, she didn't risk letting down her guard. If she had to guess, they were likely vagabonds; or perhaps the two boys were *ronin*. As to the girl's role, she wasn't sure, but she did have a short sword at her hip.

"Afternoon," Mayumi said stiffly. Even though she was a retired Kawa-Nin, she still retained one or two of her skills. A few carefully concealed kunai were hidden in her sleeves.

The buxom redhead flashed a winning smile, which threw Mayumi off a bit. Her smile masked her worry, so Mayumi had to think that was how the girl dealt with such things. Also, the redhead reminded her of *someone*... but who?

"Hi! We need a room, granny, Dattebayo!"

"Please." The black-haired teen added impassively.

At least the black-haired boy had *some* semblance of manners. Crossing her arms, Mayumi asked, "What happened to your friend?"

Gaara glanced down at Zoro's wounds before glancing back up to the innkeeper.

"He fell."

"It looks like a pretty serious fall."

"He tripped and fell."

"Uh-huh..." the woman wasn't buying it. "What, he tripped and fell into a spike pit?"

"It was a deep pit." Gaara answered.

The teen's awkward impassiveness and his avoidance was both frustrating and off-putting.

"Whatever, it's not my business," Not wanting to deal with them any longer, Mayumi handed Naruko a room key saying, "That'll be 700 ryo

for the night. It's an extra 200 for every extra day. Room's up those stairs, third door to your left."

"Thanks, granny!"

The pair quickly retrieved the money from their injured comrade's pocket, and Mayumi ignored the bloodstains with practiced ease.

"Do you have a healer here?" the blue-eyed teen asked.

"Yes, but he's also the town drunk," was the reply. "If he's not at his house, then he's at the bar. If he's not in the bar, check the alleys behind the bar."

The teen nodded, and the peculiar boy and girl dragged their bloody and passed-out member upstairs. Watching them go, Mayumi lit a pipe and chewed on the mouthpiece as she puffed. Mayumi was a perceptive one; she had been running this inn for almost sixty-four years after a mission that turned south had put her into early retirement. She had seen nearly every type of character under the sun. She honestly wouldn't have been surprised if something or someone new suddenly popped up on their shores.

After having observed the strange trio, she tried to place where she had seen that girl before, but she couldn't recall just *where* she had seen the girl. Or perhaps the girl merely reminded her of someone. The raven-haired teen had been the complete opposite of the girl; completely serious and the fact he hadn't even blinked once during the short time speaking with her made him all-the-more off-putting.

Mayumi didn't get the impression that they were going to do anything that put anyone in danger. They genuinely seemed like a couple of scared kids worried for their friend. The fact that none of them really had any identifiers wasn't all that appealing. Rogue-Nin were often more dangerous than Missing-Nin. But whoever they were, and whatever they were doing, as long as they didn't cause trouble for her and her business, then that was fine. They could play dress-up all they wanted and she wouldn't give a damn.

0o0o0o0o0

Huffing and puffing into their room, the two boys practically dropped Zoro down on an old futon, accidentally hitting his head against the hard, wooden floor. At first, they had been concerned that they had injured him even more, but a loud snore along with mutterings about 'booze' and 'fight me' were the only things that escaped Zoro.

Sighing with relief, they dropped their disguises and adjusted the teen into a more comfortable position.

"One of us needs to find the healer." Naruto stated.

"Yes. Which one of us should it be?"

"Uh...how about we play rock-paper-scissors and see who goes?"

Gaara balked. "How can you suggest playing a game when Zoro-nii is hurt?"

"You've never played—oh..." Naruto sighed, running a hand over his face before he explained, "No, look, it's quick, like this," Naruto showed Gaara the hand signs and which ones defeated which.

But now Gaara was questioning how the game worked.

"How does paper defeat rock? Is it special? And what about this rock? How big of a rock is this?"

"I *don't know*, 'ttebayo!" Naruto huffed. "Look, let's jus' play a round, an' whoever loses stays here, an' the winner finds the healer'."

Naruto won with "paper" against Gaara's "rock" which left his friend in a somewhat sour mood. *How did paper beat rock?!*

Hanging into their disguises once again, Naruto stepped out of the room. So Naruko went to find the town healer. When he couldn't find the man at his office/house, Naruto followed the woman's advice and after asking around the bar, eventually found the man passed out on the muddy ground in an alley behind the bar. This was pathetic. Judging from the man's smell, he had consumed quite a bit of alcohol, but knowing how Zoro smelled when he drank, his brother could drink much more and only fall into a light doze.

"Hey, mister." Naruto prodded the man with a foot.

Snorting belligerently, the man slowly pushed himself up so that he was leaning back on his elbows. Blinking a few times, the man eventually came to realize who dared to disturb his slumber.

"Hellooooo," he slurred. He gave the beautiful redhead above him a seductive look. His expression came out looking more constipated than anything. Naruto didn't know what this guy was trying to do with his face, and in all honesty it was weirding him out.

"You stink, Dattebayo." The girl before him stated. "Look, mister, you're a healer, right? My brother needs your help."

"Nottin an'condishen tobe treatin' folksh."

It took Naruto a solid three minutes to decipher what the guy was saying.

"*What?!* But he's bleeding! Just give me some bandages or something, *please!*"

The man pulled himself up to lean on the wall as the world swirled around him. Wobbling, he pointed a shaky finger at the blonde girl. "Fer a prish."

"A what?"

"Cosht."

"We have money. Look, can we discuss this at the inn?"

The healer nodded eagerly, misinterpreting the blonde's words. Naruto ended up having to help balance the man as they walked – he was stupid *heavy!* Along with having to deal with the man grabbing at his henge's chest "by accident" forcing Naruto to focus that much harder on not dropping his disguise.

The man had the nerve to shrug and attempt to look guilty whenever Naruto shot him a glare. Naruto understood enough that this man was an idiot and a pig. When he had observed men acting like this around women, the men often suffered way more than a bruised ego; especially if the women they were hassling was a Kunoichi. They had to stop by the healer's house to grab his supplies, and then stumbled their way to the inn.

Mayumi rolled her eyes upon seeing the town drunk. She had to give the girl quite a bit of credit, getting the healer to come here. Of course, that chest and cute face could have been an incentive for the foolish healer.

The healer stumbled slightly climbing the steps leading upstairs. After the twelfth grab for his henge's chest, Naruto just forced the man to walk on his own.

The healer was obviously thinking lecherous thoughts when the girl led him to a room, and only when she opened it saying, "I'm back,

Gaara. How's Zoro-nii?" did it fully register in the healer's mind that the girl wasn't alone.

At first he felt cheated, but then he finally noticed the swords. He blinked a few more times, and his brain slowly caught up on what he was seeing. These people were carrying weapons! Then he began thanking his lucky stars that the girl hadn't killed him the first time he had grabbed her. Unless...they intended to kill him *after* he treated their friend.

"Well?" the black-haired teen asked impassively as he carefully held two swords.

"W-well' what?" the healer coughed, when he realized the black-haired teen was giving him a discomfortingly long stare.

"Help him." The teen pointed at the one passed out and bloody on the floor. "That is your job, right?" Then an afterthought "please" was added.

The healer quickly began to work, pulling open the injured teen's shirt. But then Zoro unexpectedly stirred and grabbed the healer's arm. The healer tensed, because he could feel the pressure ready to break his limb at a moment's notice.

"Where the hell are we?" Zoro asked with a glare.

"We're in the port town Hamari," Naruto quickly supplied. "The healer here is going to help you."

"Just let me sleep. That's all I need." Zoro muttered as he settled back down.

"Thash notta good'idea," the healer objected. Even though he was still intoxicated enough to slur his speech, he knew that simply wrapping up these wounds in bandages wouldn't be enough.

Abruptly, Zoro opened his eyes and shot up. He looked at the redheaded girl and the raven-haired boy before blinking a few times and then pointing at them, shouting, "WHO THE HELL ARE YOU PEOPLE?!"

"Zoro-nii, it's me!" Naruto answered.

"We're hiding." Gaara contributed helpfully.

"Why the *hell* are you a *girl?!'*" Zoro demanded.

"Because it's funny." Gaara answered for Naruto.

The healer was confused, as his brain struggled to keep up with whatever was going on with the conversation. Meanwhile, Zoro settled down when he remembered that people in the Elemental Nations could henge. The healer worked quickly; even through shaky hands and his swimming mind.

Treating Zoro for free, he left the unnerving trio behind and went home, thanking every god he could think of every step of the way that none of them had killed him, or relieved him of his limbs.

Oo-o-o-oO

It had only been a little over a day, and Zoro already insisted on moving and training.

"You really shouldn't be moving, Zoro-nii! You were bleeding and everything." Naruto argued. "Besides, can't we take a break, for a while?"

Zoro simply cocked his eyebrow and glared. "Huh? You wanna relax even more? You had a chance to earlier."

"I think Naruto is right," Gaara started. "You should rest more..."

Gaara trailed off when Zoro scowled at him.

"I don't need any rest, sand-brat. I got plenty of sleep, so I'm fine."

"I don't think that's how it works, Zoro-nii..." Gaara muttered.

Zoro rolled his eyes at the two brats. They were worried for nothing! All he needed was a few hours of sleep, which he had gotten. Therefore, he was absolutely fine.

Naruto couldn't take it much longer. "Dammit, we were *worried* about you, Dattebayo!"

Zoro looked at Naruto, somewhat surprised at the outburst.

"What if that guy had beaten you? Then what would we have done?!" He was glaring, holding back tears. "You can't leave us alone like that, you stupid jerk!"

Gaara knitted his non-existent eyebrows together. Looking at the floor, he mumbled, "I don't like being helpless, Zoro-nii. We managed to get you to Hamari, but what if we hadn't made it in time? I couldn't carry you on my sand..."

The truth was, he had been scared. Gaara viewed Zoro and Naruto much like he had Yashamaru. He had already lost his uncle, and losing either Zoro or Naruto was an unimaginable thought.

Zoro blinked and blinked again. Something slowly began to register in his mind about what the boys were saying. Zoro sighed, and rubbed the back of his head, muttering, "Dammit..."

He had two kids to look after. Yeah, he had the thought before, but... when the prospect of fighting Juzo came about, he may have been protecting them, but...that had sort of fallen to the backburner. Fighting and getting stronger, testing limits through various challenges and fighting like a wild, demon-beast had always been pretty much him his entire sword-wielding career. He had wanted to test himself; purposefully holding back at times so he could see what all Juzo could do.

Zoro realized...he no longer had the luxury of messing around, just to see what his opponent was capable of. Well...shit. He had left two kids *again*, this time in the middle of the forest to lug his dumb ass to town and find a doctor. He had a responsibility to these two, and he had promised to look after them. What good were his promises if he wasn't going to fight to keep them?

"Well...alright then. I'll be more careful next time..." his eyes glinted dangerously as he peered at the two boys. "If you want to learn to fight, we're going to step up your training."

"Hai." Gaara accepted. He would protect the only family he had left from now on.

"Hail!" Naruto accepted as well. While he would still complain about Zoro's crazy training, he could already tell that he was stronger and faster than he had ever been.

They needed to make up for lost time, and there was no way he was going to relax and take it easy simply because his torso had a few little holes in it. During Zoro's downtime, neither of the boys had even thought to meditate and speak with their respective Bijuu. They had mostly been worried about Zoro, along with being able to relax.

Earlier, as they waited for Zoro to recover, Gaara had gone exploring on his own for a bit; and when he saw the largest body of water he had ever seen in his life, he stood for almost two hours simply staring out at it. There was a certain mystical quality about the water that fascinated Gaara. Back in Suna, people had to dig deep into the sand to find water and make a well, along with hoping for rain and saving the water that fell from the sky. Natural resources weren't taken lightly. And now, here was a *full* body of water!

The water wasn't drinkable by any means, as it was far too salty. He had read about the ocean in his books, and had always wanted to see it. Gaara let simply let his thoughts about water drift, while a few of the dockworkers were fairly concerned about the raven-haired teen who didn't move a muscle. They were a tad startled when the teen unexpectedly moved and simply headed back the way he had come. His silent presence had been unnerving, and it was a relief when he left.

Naruto hadn't been able to really prank anyone since he had left Konoha, and had only done a few tame ones with Zoro. So just for the hell of it, Naruto began laying various traps here and there around the small village. It was nothing *too* nefarious: simply some people would have fish guts dumped on the floor when they opened a door; others would find things only slightly misplaced; and Naruto also used his favorite "turd on a toilet seat" prank.

Pulling Gaara aside to help him, they T.P.'ed the doctor's house because he totally deserved it, then took a few of the empty rolls of toilet paper, wet the rolls with water and tore them up before mashing them back together. After making a fair amount of the turds, Naruto and Gaara planted the turds in both the men's and women's restrooms at the inn and even on a few of the benches at the nearby restaurant. It didn't take long for horrified and disgusted screams to follow, and Naruto reveled in the chaos as he laughed uproariously from his place on top of the inn.

Pranking was great!

As Gaara observed, he had to admit that he could see the appeal.

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When Zoro learned that all Gaara and Naruto had done while he was out was prank people, he admittedly had been humored. Of course, he had been mildly disappointed that neither of the boys had thought to

train.

One of Zoro's beliefs was, "If you have downtime, and aren't sleeping or eating, you have time to train. Anything you've missed has to be made up for...possibly three times over."

Zoro of course, thought that he was going easy on the boys. After all, any training he missed he made up for by doing a few extra thousand sets of with extra weight added. Plus, they wanted to get stronger anyway, so it was a win-win.

"Aw...Zoro-nii..." Naruto clung to Zoro in his blonde Naruko form, as all the men he had ever tried this on had succumbed to the henge's wiles. "That's not fair..."

"Don't cling to me looking like that, brat." Zoro scowled as he whacked Naruto on the head.

While Naruko was admittedly useful, it was slightly unnerving for an apparent teenage girl to act like how Naruto did when he was normal.

"How much more do we have to do?" Gaara asked.

"Probably a few hundred sets," Zoro said with a shrug.

"There's no way we can do that!" Naruto objected. Zoro's way of making up for lost time didn't sound fun at all. That meant he was probably going to increase their weights and make them do various crazy exercises. Well, Naruto had been aware that Zoro would do something like that, he just hadn't realized by how much.

Gaara resigned to his fate without argument. "Oh...okay."

Heading to a small clearing a mile or so from the village, Zoro had Naruto and Gaara sparring with him together in an effort to coordinate teamwork. There were a few glaring problems with Gaara, Zoro noticed. The kid did just fine when the sand protected him, but using it as any sort of offense suddenly made him scared of hurting either Zoro or Naruto.

While the Ichibi wasn't currently whispering in his ear, thirsting for blood, Gaara's automatic response, or at least that of his sand's, was to eliminate the threat. Which meant that the "threat" was the two people he absolutely *didn't* want to hurt because being near them when having to attack made him hesitate. His hesitation meant that he lacked the confidence of control; and that lack of control made him

an unwitting danger to those around him.

All Zoro could mutter about the continuous cycle of the problem was, "Dammit."

So there they sat in their little clearing, Zoro talking to Gaara.

"You have more control than you think you do, Gaara." Zoro insisted, trying to convince the boy of the fact. "I know you don't want to hurt us, so you won't."

"But..." Gaara started to argue, but Zoro cut him off by ruffling his hair. Gaara wanted to tell Zoro about the people he had hurt and even killed when they hadn't even been trying to attack him in the first place.

"If you don't want to hurt people with your sand, you're gonna have to learn control." He didn't want to overwhelm Gaara, so they started out simple enough.

Gaara simply had to defend both himself and Naruto, while the other had to go on the offense. All Gaara had to do was defend Naruto from Zoro's strikes with his bokutō, and even act as a diversion so that Naruto could have an opening. The redhead only agreed because it seemed like he wouldn't have to attack.

Things seemed to be going fine, their training session slowly began picking up speed as Zoro increased the number of attacks which the boys had to defend against. At one point, Zoro came in for an attack, while Naruto tried to dodge by rolling away from him, but Zoro wasn't giving the boy a chance to recover. The moment that Zoro was swinging to strike Naruto, Gaara quickly positioned himself in between Naruto and Zoro. He quickly raised his hand to will his shield to move quickly; but instead of acting as a simply shield, his sand also rapidly spiked out as a secondary form of defense.

Zoro quickly dodged, but one of the spikes cut across his upper right arm. Zoro grimaced, and quickly backed away. Gaara could smell fresh blood and rapidly lowered his shield. His eyes widened at Zoro's bloody arm.

"I...I'm sorry..." Gaara started, but Zoro wasn't paying attention.

Zoro heaved a sigh as he picked up the now cut-up bandana that had been on his arm. "Damn...and I just got this too..."

Zoro then turned to Gaara and grinned. "Good job, Gaara."

Zoro turned his attention back to his bandana. It was a shame, too. He had gotten somewhat attached to it.

"Are...are you alright?"

"Hmm? This is nothing."

"Well, you're bleeding, again." Naruto observed the obvious with a frown. "Good thing that ero-doctor left us all those bandages. You sure get injured a lot, Dattebayo."

Zoro didn't respond to that – simply because it was an occupational hazard. Although he was annoyed that the boy said it with a tone that indicated such an injury had been avoidable.

Gaara was about to ask Zoro if he was mad at him, but decided not to. Zoro *had* threatened to increase his weight Seals if Gaara asked him that particular question one more time. He felt bad about ruining Zoro's bandana, and wondered if he could replace it – that was when Gaara remembered the hitai-ate he had taken.

"Zoro-nii?" Gaara pulled out the hitai-ate and handed it to the teen. "I'm sorry about your bandana. You seemed to really like it."

Zoro eyed the hitai-ate, and figured that it would have to do for now. He could always get another bandana some other time. Zoro tied the hitai-ate around his head, making sure to cover his hair as well. "... Thanks."

Gaara smiled his shy smile, pleased.

After treating his wound and tossing his old bandana away, it was Gaara's turn to get new clothes. They were higher quality, but still worn and were a bit impractical in the long run. Clothes meant to be worn in the desert wouldn't do well in cooler and damper climates. Thankfully, there were children in Hamari, therefore finding clothes was an easy enough task. They also needed to get winter clothing anyway, as the colder weather crept in; plus Kiri was especially cold around this time of year anyway.

Figuring on buying certain clothes that would last a while, Gaara now wore a black long-sleeved shirt, which was slightly too big on his small frame, so the sleeves had been rolled up a few times, along with dark burgundy-colored pants that had caught his eye. Gaara's shoes

were still in good enough condition to not warrant throwing them out; and Zoro figured that the kid had another year to go before needing them to be replaced.

Zoro decided to get the boys used to tree and water-walking within the next few days as they traveled before moving onto the scrolls that contained various Jutsu. They had a better use for those things than he did, anyway.

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Early the next day upon leaving the inn, there was a minor mishap when suddenly Zoro found himself on the roof of the inn, terrifying Mayumi when she was hanging laundry on the clothesline outside her window.

"AAAHHHH!" Mayumi screamed when she saw a large figure suddenly move into her peripheral vision. She was so startled, she threw her laundry up into the air as a diversion (at least that was what she told herself and she was sticking to it) and gripped a kunai tightly in her hand. Rounding on the figure, she demanded, "How the *hell* did you get up *there?!?*"

Mayumi's eyes narrowed on the Kiri hitai-ate. He wasn't a missing-Nin, but she didn't recall him wearing the thing before. Plus, the fact that *he* was a Kiri-Nin seemed outright implausible.

"You moved the stupid inn, you hag!" Zoro shot back, looking at Mayumi as if *she* were insane – which she did not appreciate. He did *not* get lost! His ability just...sort of caused him to disappear and reappear some places when they moved. Zoro quickly jumped down from the roof to join the two brats. Gaara gripped his arm while Naruto led the way.

Mayumi was sure that a good decade or two had been taken off of her life. If she died that day, she was coming back to haunt that boy! Grumbling curses as she went to gather her now-soiled laundry, she paused when she thought about what that boy had done. She didn't think it had been a Shunshin; it was far too quiet and smooth for that. What sort of Jutsu *was* that?

"Who the hell are you people?"

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Meanwhile, in Gaara's mindscape, the Ichibi could do nothing but let

his chaotic mind wander. While "physically" he was asleep, mentally, he was very much awake. He cursed the brat that not only contained him but also had taken away his voice. Ichibi found himself watching Gaara's memories since this Zoro guy came along (plus this asshole was also responsible for the unwelcome change in his host).

"What the hell are you doing, sand-brat?! Why are you suddenly listening to that stupid monster's voice?! Drown him out, because if you listen to the shit that thing is spewing out, then you really will be the monster everyone says you are!" Zoro then ripped his arm out of Gaara's sand's hold, ignoring the bloody cuts as he drew Wado Ichimonji, and its blade caught the moonlight. "You see this sword, Gaara? I, Roronoa Zoro, make a swordsman's promise right here and now that I will protect you! You never have to be afraid, because if anyone tries to hurt you, then they'll have to deal with me, first. Got that, Gaara?"

Ichibi didn't understand. Humans hated and feared Bijuu, saw them as weapons and tools to be exploited, and yet this Human had not one but two Jinchuuriki under his care and treated them like well...Ichibi wasn't sure. No Human had ever acted like this f**king stupid teen did. It didn't make sense in one too many ways. The teen was slightly demented, something of which Ichibi (somewhat) approved of. But this Human... forcing Gaara and the stupid Fox to have a crazy training regimen, and Ichibi wouldn't deny that the Human had a crazy amount of strength.

He couldn't watch events as they happened, but only 24 hours after the fact. So after mulling over Gaara's older memories, which wasn't much, by the way. The kid was eight years old, and his memories were limited to the eight years he had been alive. But Gaara hadn't started fully retaining his memories until he was three years old; anything beyond that was fuzzy at best. So, Ichibi could do nothing but wait until new memories popped in or re-watched the old ones. One memory that stuck out to him was the one from the day the little bastard came to see him.

"I was thinking last night... Those Beasts of yours are like swords. Currently, they're sheathed, and won't listen to anyone; not even the only ones who can wield them. They've gotta be given respect, while you must earn their respect in return."

"What?" Gaara cocked his head, remembering Zoro had said something like that before. Still not really understanding, he asked, "My monster is like a sword? How so?"

"Yep, you pretty much have to prove you have the right to wield them. There are some swords that have to be tamed, but since your Beasts are alive, your approach to them must be different."

"Different how?" Gaara asked.

"By finding a unique balance between you, whatever it is." Zoro shrugged. He held up Wado Ichimonji. "This sword belonged to someone else before it was given to me...I asked for it. But I proved to this blade I had the right and the conviction to wield it."

"You talk about the sword as if it's alive." Gaara said in interest.

"Alive, but not in the traditional sense."

"You actually think the Fox and the Tanuki have names?" an incredulous Naruto questioned.

"Why wouldn't they?" Zoro answered as if it were the most obvious thing.

Ichibi *did* have a name, but his previous hosts had never known it. They thought him to be a simple beast, the f**kers. His previous container had said something about him learning love and acceptance someday, or some ridiculous nonsense like that. What foolishness! If only he could wake up and break out of here! If only the brat would just *let him out!*

Ichibi glared at the memory of Zoro. ***"This is all your fault, you f*cker."***

Insulting someone from a memory didn't help his circumstances, but it made him feel better, if only slightly. Watching the memory of when Gaara and Zoro first crossed paths, Ichibi frowned.

"You're not a monster."

A memory of a man flashed in Ichibi's mind.

He was standing...somewhere...before this. Before being locked away. But he was outside, standing at the foot of a cliff that nearly reached his chin while a man sat on the cliff so that they could be eyelevel.

"You aren't a monster, Tanuki-san." The man looked up at him from his spot. His face was blurry, and he held a black-sheathed sword casually over his shoulder. Ichibi couldn't see his face, but somehow knew the man was smiling at him, in a gentle sort of way. His tone of voice was

thoughtful; even...sad, somehow. *"I think... applying 'monster' to you is a loose term. I mean, even **Humans** can be monsters. You've seen what Humans are capable of, yet they dare to call you and your siblings, monsters. Tsk, tsk, tsk!"*

The unwelcome memory faded out, and Ichibi shook his head. Since *when* would he have conversed with such a lowly Human as that man? When he could kill and destroy, just as he was intended for? As if he would *ever* lower himself to do such a *vile* thing as *speak* with a f**king Human.

But then, the memory of Zoro's fight appeared, interrupting Ichibi's internal rage. He observed the fight again and again, watching how Zoro moved and how he faded in and out. His yellow eyes narrowed. Somewhere in his jumbled memories, he remembered a Clan that had those abilities.

Perhaps...things were getting slightly more interesting than he originally thought.

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Getting a local fisherman named Mako to take them to a second port in Fire Country was easy enough. Gaara and Naruto seamlessly slipped out of their henges and followed Zoro onto the fisherman's boat. All they had to do was help Mako out for a few hours before taking them to the other port.

It was both Naruto and Gaara's first time on a boat, which was exciting for the blond, but the redhead was busy miserably losing his breakfast. Although he liked the ocean, Gaara didn't think he could handle riding a boat very much, much less *living* on one. But the boy persevered and pushed himself to help out as much as he could; whether that meant helping pull in the nets, learning how to properly tie knots in the nets and the ropes connecting to the sail, and even gutting the fish.

Mako smiled and as they worked he told the boys stories about ships that went missing in the dangerous fog of the ocean. His stories consisted of ships that disappeared never to be seen again; a ship that was completely intact, yet her crew was entirely missing; ships that got lost in the fog for a few hours, only to discover that they'd been gone for *years* once they got out.

The stories fascinated the boys, while Zoro simply remained silent and listened.

Hours later, the tired and fish-smelling trio finally made their way from Kawa to the southern region of Fire Country.

"We shouldn't stay here for too long," Zoro said. "I don't know if Konoha has given up the search for you yet, brat. Stay close, both of you."

"Hai!" both boys agreed.

OoOoO

As they walked, both Naruto and Gaara were attempting tree-walking.

"Gahh!" Naruto shouted out in surprise when the tree's bark shattered under his foot. Naruto fell to the ground with a heavy sounding **THUD** and he groaned in frustration. "Why isn't this working?!"

Gaara was attempting it now, but his results weren't any better. Gaara had simply ran straight at the tree and tried climbing it by running up really fast, but that ended in epic failure as he fell to the ground. Thankfully, his shield protected him from any injury.

"...You both are usin' way too much chakra." Zoro stated lazily after watching the fifth failed attempt from Gaara and the eight from Naruto. He remembered Naruto using the climbing techniques before, but it appeared he had been doing them unintentionally.

Thinking for a moment, Zoro said, "Try this," a soft blue glow encased Zoro's hand and he placed it against the tree. "Focus your chakra into your hand slowly, and you'll get an idea of how much you're supposed to use."

It took a few more tries, but it wasn't long before Gaara was sitting on one of the tree's limbs, smiling somewhat smugly. "I did it!"

Zoro smirked. "Good job, sand-brat."

Naruto gave Gaara a determined glare and after two more tries, he was sitting next to Gaara with a look of triumph. He grinned foxily, and gave his brothers a victory sign.

"Very impressive, brat."

Naruto then jumped to his feet, and although he stumbled slightly, he retained his balance.

"Gaara! Let's see how high we can climb!"

Naruto rapidly began to ascend the tree, with Gaara right behind.

A part of Zoro wondered if he should warn them not to climb too high. Well, if Gaara fell, he would be fine. If Naruto fell, he'd probably be fine too... Zoro didn't really want either of them to hit the ground from too high up, but preferably when they were closer to the ground. It would be a good learning experience on being careful, and making sure to keep a constant flow of chakra to stay connected to the tree.

But of course, that point became moot when the limb that Gaara and Naruto were both attached to unexpectedly snapped under their combined weight.

Zoro's eyes widened in a 'oh shit' moment, and he moved to catch the pair before they hit the ground. Zoro abruptly found himself several feet in the air, which honestly surprised him and shocked both boys. He quickly grabbed them and focused on moving them to the ground where they all landed in a disgraceful, groaning heap while the tree branch crashed to the ground a few feet away.

Naruto was the first to sit up. "That was *so cool*, 'ttebayo!"

Gaara smiled in agreement. "...It was fun."

Zoro just groaned again. "You damn brats..."

Naruto just laughed out loud, while Gaara hid a laugh behind his hand.

"You're in for it now!" Zoro shouted. These damn brats were a pair of troublemakers in the making.

The two Jinchuuriki took off down the path with Zoro not far behind.

Gaara had never played a game like this before; the other children had always been too afraid of him. But now, he was running with Naruto as Zoro shouted curses and empty threats at them. Naruto grabbed Gaara's arm and they scaled another tree a short distance away from the road, and the blond was desperately trying to suppress his giggles.

"Be quiet so Zoro-nii can't find us." Naruto managed to whisper.

Gaara nodded silently.

"*There you are,*" a voice from behind them sounded, causing both boys

to cry out in shock.

Zoro had a near-demonic grin on his face as they fell to the ground. They weren't actually all that high up, and the worst they suffered was a few scrapes and bruised egos.

"That's for causing unnecessary trouble. Make sure to retain your hold even when you get surprised, damn brats."

Naruto pulled down the skin from under his eye and stuck his tongue out at Zoro, while Gaara simply scrunched up his face and stuck out his tongue, and Zoro flipped both of them his middle finger.

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It was late afternoon, and other than passing a few and far between fellow travelers, who gave Zoro curious and even wary stares, nothing of note happened.

Naruto was appreciating the weather, as it had been his home. Gaara also preferred this weather. After being able to compare it with the weather in Suna and Hiwa, this one was much better. The trees here were still big, but much smaller than Hiwa's trees.

"We'll definitely have to have ramen soon, Dattebayo!" Naruto chirped happily, already thinking of food. "I hope we can get some at the next town!"

"Is ramen *really* that good?" Gaara asked, never having had the food before. Naruto had mentioned ramen a few times before, but Gaara hadn't really thought to ask until now.

Naruto turned around to face Gaara so fast, the boy thought that he had said something to insult his fellow Jinchuuriki.

"*You've never had ramen?*" Naruto asked in a low voice, staring at his friend. Naruto probably would have been less shocked if Gaara suddenly sprouted two heads and began tap dancing.

Gaara shook his head. Feeling guilty, he mumbled, "Is-is that bad?"

"It's the *worst*, 'ttebayo!" Naruto cried. "*How* can you go on living if you've *never* had the *best food to ever exist?!*"

Zoro rolled his eyes at Naruto's dramatics.

"Zoro-nii! Gaara's never had ramen!"

"So I heard." Zoro replied blandly. Something in his peripheral vision glinted in the sunlight. He turned his head to look, but saw nothing. That was suspicious...

Grabbing Gaara's shoulders, Naruto stated, "It's settled. We'll *have* to feed you ramen next place we come to!"

Instead of responding to Naruto, Gaara was looking in the same direction as Zoro. "What's that noise?"

"MOVE!" Zoro shouted, drawing Wado Ichimonji in one swift move. The two boys jumped different directions as well, away from an oversized shuriken that shot at Zoro. What was with people and those things? Zoro decided whoever liked using them was an asshole. "Tch, just my kinda luck."

"So you *are* a foreign-Nin. But no scratch through your hitai-ate...how interesting." A tall man stepped out of the forest, carrying another of the oversized shuriken while a third was on his back. He stared suspiciously at the Kiri hitai-ate. "I have to admit, that was an impressive ploy."

Zoro took in the sight of a Konoha hitai-ate on the man's waist. Dammit, he had thought that they were far enough away and had been gone long enough that they would have passed through this area already.

The Konoha-nin charged forward and grabbed his oversized shuriken that he had originally thrown using chakra strings and spun both of his weapons at Zoro, who easily dodged.

"What the-?" the Konoha-nin started when Zoro abruptly disappeared from in front of him to appear by his right side, sword drawn.

"No you don't!" a Kunoichi intercepted the attack with a kusarigama.

"GAH!" the Ninja wielding the shuriken yelled when sand grabbed his weapon and ripped it away from him. He blinked dumbly at the redheaded boy who took his weapon and tossed it away somewhere into the forest. The Konoha-Nin had to pause as he wondered where *this* kid came from.

Deciding to forget about his lost weapon, the Konoha-Nin quickly moved to help his partner while keeping an eye on this other kid.

The Kunoichi with the kusarigama jumped back from Zoro, and in

numerous swift movements, she began spinning her weapon using its chain and started rapidly swinging it in attempt to strike Zoro.

Naruto saw the weapon and his eyes sparkled. He had never seen a weapon like this one before! "So *cool!*"

"Oi, don't be impressed with her!" Zoro objected as he narrowly blocked another strike.

"Hey! Let me go!" Naruto shouted when someone grabbed him from behind. The Ninja with the oversized shuriken had managed to sneak up on him and now Naruto found himself being hoisted under the Ninja's arm. Kicking and struggling, the man managed to hold Naruto so that his arms were pinned at his sides. "Zoro-nii!"

"*NARUTO!*" Zoro shouted, but he had to block another strike from his opponent. "What the-!" Zoro found his feet trapped in thick mud, and he began mentally cursing as he tried to think of a way out of this while making sure Naruto wasn't taken. The blade moved unnaturally for a second or two before wrapping around Zoro's sword to keep him from using it and *somehow* he was prevented from moving back to dodge. Shit! His eyes widened when he realized the blade was aiming for his temple. It unexpectedly veered off-course and Zoro quickly pulled his head back as the blade sliced across his forehead; or rather the hitai-ate.

Zoro *did not* like how close the blade had come.

The reason for the kusarigama going off course was thanks to Naruto, who realized that his captor was using a clone to hold Zoro in place while another helped manipulate the blade. So Naruto did the only thing a person in his position could do: he managed to bite his captor on the leg and held on.

"OW!" the Ninja shouted as he jerked, trying his best to keep his grip from loosening on the struggling Jinchuuriki. "You brat!"

As he was fighting with keeping his hold on the Jinchuuriki, and make the thing let him go, the clones were rapidly assaulted by sand, forcing them to dispel along with causing the kusarigama to narrowly miss killing Zoro. The following seconds the Shinobi was forced to jump away when sand shot towards him, the quick movement forced Naruto to let go. The Shinobi stared in shock at the red-head who glared at him as waves of sand and massive Killing Intent flowed around his small figure. "Put Naruto down."

Gaara charged forward, sand at the ready. When the Shinobi moved to dodge again, Naruto had finally managed to pry an arm loose and drew his sword. The Shinobi cried out in pain when Naruto stabbed him through the leg.

"You f**king little *demon*!" the man shouted as he resisted grabbing his wound as he was now using both arms to hold a still-struggling Naruto in place. He glared at Naruto with such vehemence that it caused the boy to freeze. The Ninja then mentally berated himself for scaring the brat and making him all the less cooperative. The tense moment was interrupted by Gaara who matched the Shinobi's glare and then some as he closed in.

"Naruto is not a *demon*!"

Sand shot towards the Shinobi, which he narrowly dodged. He cried out when it scraped across his left shoulder and back. He managed to land on one of the trees higher up, hopefully out of reach of the sand-kid.

"I'm not **going back to Konoha!**" Naruto roared, his eyes flashed purplish-red for only a moment, a relief to the Konoha-Nin carrying him. The Fox didn't seem like it was going to come out, but the thought terrified him. "I'm staying right here, with my brothers, 'ttebayo!"

"Bro...thers?" the Shinobi echoed, shoving down the feelings of nervousness. What had this Zoro guy been telling the Fox-brat? And *who the hell* was this other kid?! But the slight distraction was going to be his folly. "Gah!"

He was finally forced to release Naruto when he sliced through the man's leg and sand grabbed his other arm. Gaara stood only a few feet away on one of the lower branches, a scathing glare met the Shinobi's uncertain gaze. This man... Gaara was furious. This man tried to take Naruto away!

"*Sabaku Kyu!*" Gaara snarled, crushing the Konoha-Nin's arm. Fortunately for the man, he didn't lose the arm completely.

"*AHHH!*" The Shinobi grabbed his large shuriken and threw it haphazardly at Gaara, who simply glanced at where it landed several feet away.

Hoping it was a decent enough distraction, and out of desperation, the man tried swinging the weapon at Gaara using chakra threads. Gaara's

shield easily blocked the weapon. Naruto then pounced on the man's back and began hitting him repeatedly with his fists.

"Leave us alone!"

With two limbs injured, the Konoha-Nin was practically immobile. He struggled to reach around and grab Naruto, and finally succeeded in grabbing a handful of Naruto's shirt. Tossing Naruto to the ground, knocking the wind out of the boy.

The man screamed, "Just stop it already!"

He froze when a figure appeared in the trees above them...

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Once he was freed from the chakra threads, Zoro sent his opponent a predatory grin that sent shivers down the Kunoichi's spine.

"Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu!" Zoro called out as he swung his sword towards the ground. The results of the attack was on a much smaller scale, but it got the work done as it freed Zoro from his muddy prison. Zoro then quickly performed a spinning maneuver when his opponent threw numerous kunai at him, easily evading the projectiles. Activating his Kekkei Genkai, Zoro charged straight at his opponent and flickered, only to reappear on the woman's left and swung his sword in a horizontal arc. The Kunoichi barely managed to block when a massive wave of Killing Intent washed over them, followed closely by her partner's scream.

Quickly jumping back to widen the distance between them, and she stared wide-eyed at Zoro when she landed on a thick tree branch. She carefully glanced to where she could see her partner, feeling sick to her stomach when she saw his arm. How...

What was she supposed to do here?

"What sort of technique did you do?" She asked Zoro warily. Because that move...it *wasn't* shunshin! And her partner...

Before Zoro could offer a snarky comment, a calm voice spoke first.

"Finally, we found you." A young man with black hair and red eyes stood in one of the surrounding trees. Another man that looked to be around the same age stood at his side.

"Itachi! Shisui!" Zoro's opponent shouted in evident relief. She smirked confidently as she turned to Zoro, who was now cursing his luck. They were outnumbered, even if it was just by one. And it was four (well, three not counting the injured one) Konoha-Nin vs him and two kids under ten. He was wondering if he could somehow teleport over to the boys and grab them and teleport away before the others could grab them. "You're in for it now!"

"Yes, he is." Itachi stated dryly, his eyes flashing red.

Zoro's opponent got a far-away look in her eyes, along with her partner. The Kunoichi cursed, "Dammit! They got away! Where'd they go?!"

"That stupid Fox kid and the one with the sand just vanished from here, too. Look at what those little bastards did to me!" the man motioned to his injured limbs.

The two began to disagree with each other when they were discussing whether or not they should pursue Zoro, or return to Konoha because one of them was injured. The woman quickly began treating his wounds doing what she could while they argued – an argument that she was winning. The woman was unwilling to pursue their targets when he was so horribly injured.

Casually walking passed the two bickering Shinobi, Itachi turned to the three looking at him curiously and with suspicion. "We should go."

"Wait!" Naruto started. Looking a bit embarrassed, pointing to the Kunoichi with the kusarigama, he asked, "Can I have that lady's weapon?" Blushing, he added, "I uh, I really like it..."

Shisui smirked and simply walked by the woman, red eyes flashing and seconds later, Naruto held the weapon in his hands. Eyes wide with joy and appreciation, Naruto grinned up at him. "Thanks, mister!"

"Why are you helping us?" Zoro asked, not bothering to hide the suspicion in his voice.

"We need to talk," Itachi answered. "But not here."

"Naruto, Gaara," Zoro called as he sheathed his sword, although he was still ready to draw it at a moment's notice. "Stay close."

Shisui walked up next to Zoro. "Wow, you really *do* have a Kekkei

Genkai!" he laughed as if it was the greatest joke in the world while Zoro gave him a look that was crossed between skeptical and annoyed. "People back home are *seriously* losing their shit, it's hysterical! You ran the Inuzuka Clan's pride through the mud!"

"...I don't know who those people are."

"They're some of Konoha's best trackers." Shisui explained. "Their dogs could supposedly track anything or anyone...except you."

Shisui broke out into a fit of laughter again. While the Inuzuka were nice enough people and were fun to be around, it was very humorous to him that the Inuzuka didn't have all the bragging rights they thought they did. Not that he could really be one to talk, being an Uchiha and all – but he wasn't nearly as uptight as the majority of his other relatives.

"This way," Itachi said, pointing. "We can talk over there."

Everyone turned right, except Zoro, who opted for going back the way they had come. Naruto ran back to grab his arm and guide him over with the others.

A few miles later, they settled by a small creek, and sat down. Shisui set up a shielding Genjutsu around them, if by chance someone came upon them, they would be ignored. Then, Shisui and Itachi each made a clone. Itachi glanced at the two boys with obsidian eyes. "Our clones will train both of you while we are speaking with Zoro-san."

"What kind of training?" Naruto asked with a slight frown.

"Well, we can show you how to wield that weapon, for starters." Shisui answered, "And we also have some techniques we want to show you, so let's get going!"

"Yay!" Naruto cheered. He paused for a moment, looking suspicious. "So are you going to put weights on me or somethin'? Or are you going to attack me so that I learn to use this thing much faster?"

"...What?" Shisui asked, furrowing his brows. What kind of training was Zoro doing with these kids?

"Yeah, Zoro-nii's training is awesome, but scary, 'ttebayo."

Gaara silently looked at the two skeptically.

The clones took the boys a distance away down the river and Itachi began showing Naruto how to use the kusarigama while Shisui began demonstrating various Jutsu to Gaara.

"...So..." Zoro started.

"First off, thank you for meeting with us." Itachi said, giving a nod of his head. "I am Uchiha Itachi, and this is my cousin, Uchiha Shisui."

"Yo!" Shisui gave Zoro a salute.

"We wanted to speak with you about something very important, Zoro-san." Itachi looked very grave, so Zoro straightened up and paid attention. "We understand that it's a selfish and even absurd request, but you *must not* let anyone take Naruto back to Konoha."

"Sure." Zoro yawned, lazily scratching his ear.

"He agreed so fast..." Shisui muttered, a sweat-drop forming. Zoro hadn't even argued or asked why.

Looking away for a moment and sighing, Itachi continued, feeling as if he had to explain the true direness of the situation. "If Naruto were to return, my father plans to use the Kyuubi housed within him to commit a coup against Konoha."

"What?" Zoro straightened up a bit upon hearing that. "How could he do something like that?"

So Zoro knew about the Kyuubi... Itachi noted. Yet, he didn't act like someone who was trying to use its power. When that one Shinobi attempted to flee with Naruto in tow, there had been genuine concern in his voice and on his features. Not even the best actor could pull something like that off – and it was extremely difficult, if not almost impossible to fool the Sharingan.

"With this," Shisui's eyes flashed red. "The Sharingan is a powerful tool, and a dangerous one, especially if someone knows how to use it to its fullest capability."

"You see, Zoro-san... if my father were to have the necessary tools for committing a coup d'état, then I..." Itachi grimaced. "I would have to do the unthinkable. Due to certain...obligations, I would have no choice but to wipe out my entire Clan."

"The hell?!" Zoro seethed. "*What* kind of bullshit obligations do you

have that would force you to do something like that?!"

"Danzo, along with various complicated village rules and yet more obligations." was all Itachi said.

"You mean that bandaged-burn-victim guy?" at Itachi's nod, Zoro muttered, "I *knew* I didn't like that son of a bitch." He blinked, then pointed at Shisui, "Wait, if Itachi has to kill his family members, what about you?"

"I'm willing to lay my life on the line so that the village will be safe. If Itachi has to kill me, then so be it." Shisui replied. Looking wistful, he continued. "What's a little over a hundred people when it comes to thousands? And what about him?" Shisui motioned to Naruto who was now tentatively spinning his weapon while Itachi's clone looked on. "An innocent kid is going to be pulled into this mess, unless of course, he's not even there to begin with. Who is that red-haired kid anyway?"

"Some sand-brat we picked up along the way." Zoro answered helpfully.

"We should warn you as well...knowing the Third, he'll have asked Jiraiya by now to join the search for Naruto as well."

"Jiraiya?"

"The Toad Sage?" Shisui said. When Zoro still gave him a blank look, Shisui added, "One of the Legendary Sannin?"

Zoro blinked. "Uh...not ringing a bell."

"What, have you been living under a rock or something?" Shisui demanded.

"You could say that..." Zoro tried to remember if Koshiro had mentioned the Legendary Sannin, and the lesson hadn't stuck because of one reason or another. It wasn't like he actually considered seeking any of them out, mostly because none of them were swordsmen, so there had been no reason to pay attention. He could already picture Koshiro's disapproving gaze.

"Anyway," Itachi interrupted, "I recommend that we travel with you; at least for a while. Spreading misinformation is a vital skill that a Shinobi must use at any given opportunity. They'll be looking for a teenager and one boy; but not three teens and two boys. While traveling, we can at least help train them."

"Alright..." Zoro figured it wouldn't hurt. He glared at the ground for a moment before asking something that had been plaguing his mind since this craziness with Naruto started. If Itachi and Shisui were offering their help, it wouldn't hurt to ask, right?

"Do either of you know Kakashi?"

"I do." Itachi answered.

Zoro didn't look at them as he asked, "Do...do you know how he's doing?"

Shisui and Itachi looked at each other before the former responded, "Well, from what he's told people, you managed to slip away from his clone that night during the confusion. It has quite a few of the higher-ups up in arms because he's a world-class ANBU with expert-tracking Nin-Dogs, and some no-name guy like you gives him..."

"Wait, his *clone*?"

Shisui stopped when Zoro started laughing. That lazy flea-bag sure knew how to make a guy worry! Taking in a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and looking considerably less tense, Zoro looked at the two Uchiha. "Kakashi's a real bastard, you know that?"

Looking at the ground, Zoro made a request of the two Uchiha, because after all, they were helping him out, so they could be trusted. Besides, the least they could do for him for keeping Naruto away from Konoha was to pass along a message.

"When you return to Konoha, would you mind telling Kakashi that the brat's doing fine?"

"Understood," the cousins replied.

Shisui wondered what exactly Kakashi and Zoro's relationship was. He had obviously been concerned, only to act relieved when it was revealed that Zoro had gotten away from his clone.

Itachi put it together within seconds, or at least he had some semblance of an idea. Zoro and Kakashi were friends, and if Zoro's message was anything to go by, Kakashi *knew* that Naruto was with Zoro. For Kakashi to allow Zoro to take Naruto considering who the boy's father was, there must be a great deal of trust between the two. Itachi let a ghost of a smile cross his lips. An unwitting interference on Kakashi's part, most definitely. He owed the man a large debt. Keeping

Naruto out of Konoha was only a small part of it.

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As Zoro and the others talked, Naruto and Gaara had progressed an impressive amount in their training. Gaara was much faster than Shisui had anticipated, and his sand-shield was something else! Now if only the kid wouldn't hesitate in attacking them... but after seeing what the sand did to that guy's arm earlier, Shisui could understand the kid's hesitation. Naruto was able to spin his kusarigama in a fairly smooth circle. It was clear by how they moved that Zoro's training, whatever it consisted of, was paying off.

While Itachi would much rather children these boys' ages be able to stay at home and have a chance to *be* children; they were under the care of one wandering teen, and Zoro could only do so much. It was best that they be prepared for the dangers that lurked within the Elemental Nations. Plus, the run-in with the two other Konoha-Nin had been too close of a call.

Of course, Itachi was not planning on killing his father if he could help it – but that was only a last resort. Itachi loved his family, and knew he would break down if he ever had to do something like taking their lives. Simply waiting until his father passed the mantle onto him would have to do for now.

A little-known secret that only he and his parents were privy to was the fact that Fugaku was sick. Sometimes, a Kekkei Genkai turned on the one who was born with it. Fugaku did not want to risk information leaking out that he was ill, so he kept it hidden, so very well. Not even the Hokage knew about Fugaku.

It was estimated Fugaku only had a few months to a year left to live, which was why getting the Kyuubi back was so vital. He wanted to use its power while he was still in his prime. But Itachi and Shisui would ensure that Uzumaki Naruto would not return to Konoha while Uchiha Fugaku was still alive, not if they could help it.

"We'll be coming with you," Itachi informed Naruto and Gaara in his straightforward manner. "At least for a while. It's to ensure that whoever is looking for you is thrown off as effectively as possible."

"Oh!" Naruto raised a hand excitedly. "I know an awesome way to throw people off, Dattebayo!"

Before Itachi could ask what that was, Naruto hinged into a naked

voluptuous blonde woman with clouds conveniently covering certain parts of her body. Naruko blew Itachi a kiss with a gentle, "*chuu!*"

Itachi face-palmed, while Shisui tried in vain to stop his bleeding nose.

Gaara stared at Naruko. "Why are you naked?"

"Looks good..." Shisui muttered quietly from where he sat, at that moment appreciating being a heterosexual male.

Zoro crossed the threshold between him and Naruto within seconds and whacked the boy on the back of the head with a fist. "The hell, you brat?! You aren't walking around like that! The idea is to *not* attract unnecessary attention!"

Naruto stuck his tongue out at Zoro. "Zoro-nii is so mean!"

Once they had sorted things out, Naruto had hanged into a now fully-clothed Naruko, while Gaara simply hanged his hair black. The two Uchiha removed their identifying hitai-ate and tucked them away. Thanks to Zoro still wearing the now-scratched Kiri headband, it looked as if a rather peculiar little group was accompanying a missing-Nin for one reason or another.

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A little over two months ago, a week after Naruto's disappearance...

Jiraiya the Toad Sage, one of the Legendary Sannin, did not want to admit that he was worried, but he was worried. Upon learning that not only had his godson (who also happened to be a Jinchuuriki) been taken by some kid named Roronoa Zoro, but now the kid apparently had some sort of teleportation Jutsu that made him extremely difficult to track.

"The facts..." Jiraiya muttered to himself as he took notes. "...don't add up."

Because he was a scholarly man, he was used to doing very boring research that involved books and scrolls; and not the bathhouses that he preferred. But here he was, in the small town that 'Zoro' was supposedly from, and after talking to people and looking through a mess of not-very-well-kept town records, he had come to the grim conclusion that 'Roronoa Zoro' did not exist. Even describing him did no good. Upon looking at a sketched drawing of the teen's features, a

few townsfolk *thought* that he looked familiar, but couldn't place him.

Jiraiya couldn't help but wonder what kind of name Roronoa Zoro was, anyway. Sure, some people had odd names – 'Scarecrow', 'Weasel' among others, and his godson had been named after a food. Even those in Kumo liked calling themselves after letters in the alphabet. But he really didn't like that Zoro was a complete unknown and was an anomaly even by Shinobi standards.

He had shown up as a bounty hunter in Konoha a little over a year ago, and through an incredibly clever ploy, had shown no interest in Naruto until he simply walked out of the village with him and no-one was the wiser. *How* had he done it?

There was the matter of Gin, the traveling book salesman who had been coming in and out of Konoha for a year or so: the young man had checked into an inn, ate dinner with Zoro, and returned to the inn. But then according to witnesses he suddenly departed the premises when someone *else* (and they didn't know who) knocked on his door because they had a message for Gin. Minutes later, Gin was racing from the inn and out the village because of a "family emergency". The teen had simply disappeared into the night like a puff of smoke.

Then, there was the matter of Zoro somehow evading the best trackers the Shinobi Nations had to offer. A perturbed Tsume with every ounce of annoyance she was capable of dishing out had described the situation to him, growing all the more frustrated with every word. They had backtracked numerous times only to come to the same dead end more than once; this had happened for every member of the Inuzuka Clan.

"It's almost as if he's a ghost, or something." Tsume had commented bitterly to Jiraiya.

They had tracked Zoro outside of the village, only for him to somehow *return* to the village and even make his way through the Forest of Death. Except he hadn't used the only gate upon entering or exiting, and had even weaved through the various Genjutsu placed on the perimeter to keep people out and various creatures in. This was sounding familiar, like he had heard stories about something like this from his childhood.

Jiraiya rubbed his temples, wondering how Zoro managed to re-enter the village *while* everyone was looking for him, and no-one had even

spotted him. Or if they had, they hadn't realized that Naruto wasn't supposed to be with him. That thought caused Jiraiya to sigh out of frustration. No-one would have said anything because no-one cared about the Demon Fox.

Jiraiya wracked his brain to no avail. Zoro had knowledge of Fuuinjutsu, so perhaps this teleportation/space-time technique he was using was based on the Fourth's. He used it as a clever ploy to misdirect and throw everyone off. If that was the case, the kid was a genius and Jiraiya wanted to know who the hell he had learned from. Others believed it was some sort of unknown Kekkei Genkai, but to which Clan? No-one was really sure, and they didn't even know where to start.

Deciding that it would be best to leave, Jiraiya thanked the village leader for allowing him to see their "records" and now the man was wondering what his next move should be. He decided to get a quick drink and a bite to eat while he pondered how Zoro had effectively bamboozled Konoha's best trackers and think about what his next step should be.

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Late that afternoon three Konoha-Nin showed up to find Jiraiya sitting in the small town's bar muttering to himself as he scribbled more notes in a notebook with one hand and took a bite of food with the other.

"Good afternoon, Jiraiya-sama," one of the Nin, an Aburame greeted.

"Oh, hello, everyone." Jiraiya acknowledged the team that consisted of an Aburame, an Inuzuka, and an Uchiha. Turning in his seat, Jiraiya pleasantly asked, "How may I help you?"

"Sir, we ran into a bit of an issue." The Uchiha, a serious looking girl said. It was honestly a bit odd that an Uchiha would be anything other than police or ANBU at her age. Jiraiya had to admit the girl had quite a bit of moxie for going against Uchiha tradition and attempting to strike out on her own. "We found Roronoa's trail heading north-east in an odd, circular pattern, and finally west. We believe he was trying to confuse the trackers."

"So you haven't come bearing good news..." Jiraiya looked grim even with the half-hearted joke.

"That's correct, sir," the Inuzuka didn't look happy, and his oversized

dog-wolf hybrid whined. "They're near the west border, if not across it already."

"So they headed towards Kawa?" Jiraiya asked, quickly realizing the issue. The team could not cross the border without inciting an international incident. The only way they could legally cross the border was as escorts for someone who had business being in the other countries in the first place; such as merchants or nobility – or if they suspected that one of their missing-Nin was across the border. Even then, they had to have strong enough evidence to pursue them.

"There is a small town that is more of a stopping point for travelers about forty miles from Konoha," the Uchiha girl stated grimly. "We talked to a few people from there, but the sightings are inconclusive."

The Aburame adjusted his glasses with a finger. "According to what the townsfolk told us, a green-haired young man with three swords accompanied by a blond child passed through, but no-one remembers seeing them depart. When we presented people with a sketch of Roronoa-san, some said that he had green hair, others said he had brown. There's also people saying that Naruto-kid was either blond or had a weird hair color."

"Wait..." Jiraiya scratched his head. Zoro waited until reaching a different village to either drop or apply a henge? It certainly was a decent maneuver to misdirect them. "So he's changed his appearance?"

"He's also no longer carryin' three swords," added the Inuzuka. "We talked to a restaurant owner in another village that's only a few miles from the border who thinks he remembers seein' someone who matches Roronoa and Naruto's updated appearances. Unfortunately, they didn't stand out, so he couldn't say for sure if it was them."

Jiraiya updated his notebook with the information he had so far. Obviously, he had to take over from here; a fact that clearly bothered the team. They could no longer help look for the boy.

Jiraiya then asked, "What do you kids think of this teleportation Jutsu that Zoro uses, hmm? Have you heard of anything like it before?"

The Aburame and the Uchiha girl both shrugged.

"Well, there's the Fourth's awesome *Flying Thundergod Technique*." Inuzuka said with a hint of admiration. "But this wasn't like that...accordin' to the scent trail he left behind. I was there in the Forest of Death with my Clan tryin' to track 'im down. One of my

relatives explained how the Fourth's scent was left behind. There was a distinct smell of electrical energy. This was different. Roronoa's scent just *ended*, like he faded out."

He glanced thoughtfully to the side. "You know, now that I think about it, it almost sounds like these creepy stories my granpa would tell me and my brother. He kinda mentioned the same thing to me back when we were trackin'."

When everyone gave him a look, he explained, "My granpa told me and my bro these really weird ghost stories growin' up. One of his favorites to tell was how it was impossible to lock these ghosts out of places, and they'd sneak in and kill or kidnap you. It was often killing." Imitating an old man's voice, "The *only* thing left of the people in the barred-up house was their blood that ran down the walls!" Speaking normally again, he added, "It terrified me *so* much as a kid, I didn't want to be outside in the dark, much less outside of the village!"

"Your old relatives did that too?" Uchiha girl laughed. Again, it was a rare sight to see and hear from an Uchiha. "My great-grandfather told me about these weird mist-ghosts who you absolutely didn't want to grab you, because if they did, they could rip you apart. *Really* freaked me out. I remember my mom was so pissed at him when I absolutely refused to sleep because it just so happened to get foggy that night." Looking slightly embarrassed, she added, "You know, I was actually terrified during our first mission to Kiri. Even at 14, I was *convinced* that ghosts would come out to grab all of us."

Her Inuzuka partner snorted. "Glad I wasn't the only one. Really creepy stuff."

"I think I remember hearing something similar, from my great-aunt." the Aburame said thoughtfully. "In attempt to enter the physical realm, the ghosts would end up tearing apart the potential host's body."

Jiraiya then had to laugh as well. "You know, I can't believe I nearly forgot about it. The old man would tell my team those weird stories too when we were out on missions, except it involved the ghosts grabbing people and ripping apart their bodies as they got dragged away."

The first time he had heard those stories, he and his team had been on a C-rank mission; it was their first time going outside of the village.

After they settled around the campfire, his Sensei told them a few creepy tales involving the "*Apparitions of Mist*" that hailed from Kiri, a place known for its ruthlessness. As the stories came, Jiraiya had tried not to be jealous of Orochimaru who had Tsunade snuggling up against him in fear. It seemed that both found comfort in each other, while Jiraiya had been left out in the cold.

After all of them (even Orochimaru, surprisingly) had been thoroughly creeped out (or had he?) Hiruzen had then all-too-happily bid them goodnight. Sleep hadn't come easy, and just when they thought they could settle down, Hiruzen terrified all of them awake with a scream. While Hiruzen had thought it hysterical, Orochimaru had glared at their Sensei for nearly a week, Tsunade was absolutely furious and let Hiruzen know every chance she got. Jiraiya decided that he would mercilessly prank his Sensei for a month straight, and hell, even his teammates had joined in that time! That was when times had been simpler, before everything fell apart.

Jiraiya pushed the memories back. There was no point in dwelling on them now.

"Wow...it's been *years* since I last thought about those stories. What did your family members call them? If I remember correctly, my Sensei called them the "Apparitions of Mist".

"Uh...Space...Walkers?" the Inuzuka asked, looking unsure. It had been nearly a decade since he last thought about them.

"I think my great-grandfather called them 'Ghosts of the Bloody Void'? Something like that."

"*Kiri no Rei*? If I remember correctly, at least that was what my great-aunt called them." Aburame said. "...No, it was *Kiri no Yuurei*. Apologies. It has been years since I last heard the stories. Supposedly, the stories started with the Kiri locals and have become heavily saturated over time. There's a wide variety of folklore surrounding them, saying that they are spirits which lead people to their deaths if they ever get lost in the fog, or simply spirit them away."

As Jiraiya thought about it, he recalled overhearing corny ghost stories in taverns and he had encountered a good number of travelers who were of the superstitious sort. They absolutely refused to go anywhere if fog rolled in. Every country had their own version of the *Kiri no Yuurei*, or whatever they were called and the stories

involving the spirits had gotten ridiculous in some ways. In some versions, the *Kiri no Yuurei* broke into people's houses on foggy nights to suck their blood; in others, they were responsible for the small islands that bordered the Elemental Nations to disappear. Hell, there was even a version that claimed that the *Kiri no Yuurei* were responsible for the destruction of Uzushio, even though there were perfectly clear historical records documenting the facts.

Obviously, things had changed a bit since his Genin days. When he was a young Genin, his Sensei wasn't above weaving incredible tales of ghosts, while these kids in their late teens/nearly twenty only knew of the ghost stories from older relatives. The kids these days probably told campfire stories in the safety of their homes, because nowadays Shinobi couldn't exactly afford to be freaked out by stories that had them on edge in all the wrong ways and could even screw with their heads if their Sensei decided to be an ass and add a bit of Genjutsu to aid their storytelling.

Their reminiscing didn't last long, as the team needed to return to Konoha and Jiraiya needed to find Zoro and Naruto.

"You should head back, I'll take over from here." Jiraiya said. He offered the team an encouraging smile. "You did what you could, so thank you for the information."

After the team departed, Jiraiya headed west.

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Two weeks later, Jiraiya had stopped at a family-run restaurant for a bite to eat. He would have to contact his sources in the other countries to see if they knew anything. Seeing a group of five merchants; three men and two beautiful women, Jiraiya decided to chance it. Merchants saw people of all sorts, and chances were they hadn't seen Naruto or Zoro, but it was still worth a shot asking people who traveled for a living. One never knew what they saw until they were specifically asked.

"Excuse me," Jiraiya said as he walked up to the conversing merchants. They stopped what they were doing and turned to look at him. "Hey there. I'm Sato, I was wondering if you could help me?"

"Soran...What would that be, sir?" one of the men asked. Given how he took charge and the others simply let him, he must be the leader.

"I'm looking for someone. Two people, actually." Jiraiya pulled out

two sketches; one of Naruto and the other of Zoro. He handed the sketches over, and he knew immediately that the merchants recognized the boys.

Suspicion and even a hint of fear crossed their features as Soren and his friends looked at each other. Who was this man, and why was he looking for Zolo and Maki?

"Maybe...I'm not sure." Soran said slowly. "Why are you looking for them?"

Jiraiya recognized Soran's guarded tone, and realized that if he were to be honest with the merchant, the man probably wasn't going to be honest with him. It was likely he thought it was unusual that an older man was searching for two boys by himself. Many people learned the hard way that there were folks who simply couldn't be trusted; such as Shinobi. While many Shinobi were used as bodyguards and the like, there were those who murdered and destroyed people's lives. So Jiraiya decided to use a harmless white lie.

"They're my grandsons; Zoro and Naruto. Neither of them biologically, but blood doesn't always make family." Jiraiya said with a longing sigh. There had been a terrible accident a few months ago when the mines underneath a small village in the far north of Fire Country collapsed. People were either killed or had been separated when they were forced to relocate. There were people still desperately looking for their loved ones. It was a perfect cover story. "We got separated when those mines up north caved in. I'm hoping that someone somewhere has seen them. I've been searching for months, now."

The merchants looked at each other when "Sato" gave them the names of the two boys who had escorted them safely across the border. The boys had been a pleasure to travel with, and Zoro, as this man claimed it was, obviously had cared for Naruto. The younger of the two boys had been attached to Zoro at the hip, and more than obviously looked up to him. The two boys must have been in hiding for a reason. And neither of them had mentioned the disaster that was the northern mines. It wasn't like it was a painfully sensitive subject, so neither of them had reason to hide it.

They knew of and had met many people in their travels who had questioned them, begged them, whether or not they had seen a certain person in their travels in the hopes that they were still alive. If the two boys had been searching for their grandfather, or at least held out hopes that he was alive, then they would have said something. There

also wouldn't have been any reason for them to travel all the way to Suna when they had a higher chance of finding any friends or family members by staying in or around a place like Konoha.

"Oh..." Soran said slowly, schooling his features. "We ended up talking with them, and those weren't the names they gave us." He was a shrewd man, and he didn't think that this "Sato" person actually knew the two boys. "Zolo and Maki...that's what they said their names were."

Jiraiya's expression was one of mild disbelief. "*Zolo*" and "*Maki*"? Seriously? Did Zoro *really* think that by simply changing a slight pronunciation in his name would effectively conceal his identity? Maybe that was his ploy? Or maybe he was giving the kid too much credit.

"You met them?" Jiraiya asked hopefully. "Did either of them happen to say where they were headed? Anything helps."

"I can't remember, but I *think* they said something about heading south." Kari said, tapping her chin. "Um... I think was Maki – who mentioned the port town, Hamari. Zolo – oh, excuse me, *Zoro* suddenly got annoyed with Maki and said something about not telling people where they were headed or something like that."

"I remember that..." one of the other men said, backing up Kari. "Maki seemed excited, but then the older one appeared to scold him. I thought it was kinda odd; didn't think much of it though. He seemed worried. I hope those boys are alright..."

"I hope you find them." One of the men said with a winning smile.

"Thank you so much!" Jiraiya said with a bow.

He left to find his "grandsons", while the merchants gave subtle, worried glances to one another. They hoped that the boys would be alright, and that they weren't in any trouble they couldn't get out of.

He wasn't sure if the merchants had lied to him, or if Zoro had lied to the merchants; so just in case he was being sent on a wild goose-chase, Jiraiya sent word to a contact living near Hamari and asked him to keep an eye out.

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A certain Kiri-Nin wasn't wearing his Shinobi attire and was actually

in a disguise that covered his scar and facial tattoos when some very unimpressive looking man approached him and began asking him if he had seen the people in the sketches that he showed him. He used the names "Zolo" and "Maki" when asking about them, and right away, Juzo recognized Zoro. Juzo could honestly say that he hadn't seen either Zoro or Naruto, and now he was under the impression that Zoro was somewhere in the area. This was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity! If he could claim Zoro's head... Smirking internally, Juzo would be sure to keep an eye out.

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When one of his contacts in Hamari couldn't find anything, Jiraiya headed towards a village located somewhere in Wind Country to speak with one of his sources and hope that they had heard or seen something, and to spread the word. Because as far as he could tell, they had left Fire Country, and had passed through Kawa no Kuni briefly. Logically, the only other place they could go was Wind Country, unless they went north or suddenly veered south somewhere along the line. He would probably stop by Suna, just to scope things out.

A little over a month later, two hinged boys lugging an injured Zoro stumbled into the inn at Hamari.

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Nothing of note had happened in Wind Country, and Jiraiya was becoming frustrated. His contact living some miles from Suna had said something about the Fourth Kazekage making political moves with various local lords and others of various nobility hoping to appeal to the Daimyo at some point in the future, but nothing gave him the impression that they were plotting against Konoha. But even in Suna, people hadn't seen Zoro or Naruto, and most of the time, they were tight-lipped about anything Jiraiya could possibly ask them. A few people mentioned Zoro passing through Suna, but that had been a little over a year ago.

But one of the interesting things he had learned was that the Kazekage's brother-in-law and youngest son had been killed, along with a number of ANBU. Fortunately, no civilians had been injured. Jiraiya wrote a report back to Hiruzen, informing him of the situation.

With no need to concern himself about the goings on involving Suna, Jiraiya was pretty much back to square one.

He was traveling from Wind Country back to Fire Country through Kawa when Jiraiya came upon an unexpected sight. He was at the edge of an obvious battlefield. Obvious because the cut trees and the branches surrounding them had been cut too cleanly to be caused by something like a storm. The battle looked as if it had happened a while ago, but was still recent enough to show its scars.

"What happened here?" Jiraiya asked aloud.

A few of the trees and even the ground had wicked gashes that looked extremely deadly if whatever caused it came into contact with a person. He continued walking through the destruction when the sunlight showing through the cut-up trees caused something in the bushes to glint at the corner of his vision. Deciding to inspect it, he carefully pushed the bushes aside, then Jiraiya furrowed his brow when he found a very long and thin sword. He picked it up to get a better look.

Being left to the elements hadn't done the sword any favors, but it was obvious that whoever it had belonged to had taken decent care of it when it had been in their possession. Jiraiya decided to Seal the sword away in case it somehow led them somewhere. Seeing as how there had been a sword left here, Jiraiya now wondered where the body of the sword's owner was.

He hadn't heard of any assassinations or ambushes in this area, so it wasn't like the sword was tossed aside to discard evidence. If that was the case, it was a sloppy job. Why dispose of the body so effectively when the weapon used was left behind? Why leave the weapon behind when it clearly had been cared for? Why leave it behind at all?

Jiraiya found himself at Hamari, meeting with his contact, a very unimpressive man by any standards who looked somewhat pleased. "Good day, sir. If you're traveling, you should check out the inn. The innkeeper has some pretty interesting stories."

Jiraiya nodded his thanks and made his way to the local inn.

Upon seeing the innkeeper, Jiraiya smiled. "Afternoon, Mayumi-san. It's been awhile."

Mayumi sized Jiraiya up and down for a moment. She tapped her pipe free of any residue before asking, "You still writing that filth, Jiraiya-sama?"

"You know it."

Mayumi harrumphed. "The standards for literary works have certainly fallen."

"Ah, but it sales well." Jiraiya said sagely.

Mayumi sent the man a flat look. "Or maybe we're breeding more idiots that've lowered their standards."

With a wave of her hand she scoffed, and slowly stood, ignoring her creaking joints. "Come in the back for some refreshments, Jiraiya-san." Mayumi then walked over to an open window, leaned out and shouted, "Katsu! Come manage the front desk!"

"*Hai...*" a male's voice answered her from outside.

Jiraiya then followed Mayumi to the back where a section of the inn doubled as her family's living room. The Sannin gave a sigh of contentment as he sat down on a thick cushion at the coffee table. Mayumi played an amazing host as she served Jiraiya warm sake and tea, alongside a few small *azuki* buns.

"Ahh!" Jiraiya let the warmth wash over him. Her food was always delicious. "This is amazing, Mayumi-san!"

"Of course." Mayumi agreed. "After I was forced to retire, I certainly couldn't manage on my own. I had to be able to keep a man somehow; and good looks can only get you so far in a relationship. So I gave him reason to stay."

Jiraiya snorted. "By doing what? Poisoning his food and then offering the antidote only if he agreed to marry you?"

Mayumi gave him a sharp look. "Please, Jiraiya-sama, *do* give me some credit. I poisoned his entire family."

Jiraiya laughed, and Mayumi smirked with satisfaction. The humor of the situation of course, had been the fact that Mayumi had easily settled into the life of a civilian as the wife of an inn-keeper; a man who had adored her and their children while he had been alive. The retired life she had now would be almost any Kunoichi's dream.

After catching up, and asking about a few more formalities, Jiraiya got somewhat serious. "I heard a rumor that you had some interesting stories to tell."

Mayumi nodded, lighting her pipe as she did so. "An interesting trio

came by the inn a few days ago."

"Oh?"

"Hmm-hmm, three teenagers; one was a girl with dark red hair and whiskers on her cheeks," Mayumi indicated the markings on her own cheeks.

Jiraiya jerked at the bit of information. "Whiskers?"

"Yes," she nodded. "The girl reminded me of *someone*, and at first I couldn't think of who... but it wasn't until yesterday that it occurred to me: Uzumaki Kushina."

Now, Jiraiya just about leapt out of his seat. "*What?*"

"Uzumaki Kushina." Mayumi said again. "I knew that girl when she was young. This girl was just about the spitting image of her."

"What about the others?"

"One of the boys had black hair and blue eyes, and dark circles around his eyes. And I *mean* dark circles. He was sort of like a raccoon. And the third person on this team was heavily injured. The girl managed to drag our drunk doctor out of the mud and piss and treat their injured friend. But here comes the interesting bits."

Mayumi's eyes glinted. "The injured one was the young man you've been looking for."

Jiraiya rapidly leaned forward. "You're sure?"

"Don't doubt these old eyes of mine, Jiraiya-sama." Mayumi puffed her pipe. "When they first came here, he was wearing a simple green bandana over his hair. But when I saw him last, he was wearing a Kiri hitai-ate, and there was no line going through it. There's something else about that... he doesn't strike me as a Kiri-Nin. His teeth are all wrong, and he was tan. Kiri-Nin either have the tendency to be extremely pale or have darker hair and skin-tones – they don't tan. Sunburn, yes. Tanning? Absolutely not. That boy didn't fall into *any* of those categories. But that's not all." Mayumi looked particularly bitter. Very few had ever managed to sneak up on her like that one brat did. "On the day they left, this Zoro-brat did *something*. He managed to sneak up on me."

Jiraiya blinked, quirking his eyebrow. Mayumi had always been an

incredibly vigilant woman, and when she was younger, Kushina had tried to make a game of surprising Mayumi. Kushina had never succeeded, although one or two times she had been close. But for Zoro to manage it...

"Zoro managed to sneak up on *you*? How?"

Mayumi shrugged. "It was while I was hanging my laundry on the line outside my window. One moment, Zoro was talking to the two who were with him. Then suddenly, he was on the roof. He just about scared me half to death, honestly." She didn't want to admit to Jiraiya that she ended up throwing her clean linens everywhere as a result of being startled so badly. She'd just leave that part out. "It was unusual, though. He actually *accused* me of *moving* the inn."

"Can you explain what he did?" Jiraiya questioned.

"It was like he... just appeared out of thin air onto the roof. And before you ask, no, my roof doesn't have any sort of door access."

Furrowing his brow, wondering why Zoro would activate his technique in the middle of town, Jiraiya asked, "Could you explain it? Like, was he accompanied by a noise or a smell? Did he have some kind of tool with him?"

"No." the inn-keeper replied. "It was like... he just *faded* onto the roof, if that makes sense. One second I could see him on the ground, the next he was on the roof. If you ask me, it was like he teleported."

The cogs in Jiraiya's brain began turning.

"...Mayumi-san...have you ever heard about the *Kiri no Yuurei*?"

Mayumi made a face at the sudden change in subject. "You mean those ridiculous ghost stories travelers are always talking about?" She snorted in derision. "Heh, I heard more than a few of those in my day – especially being in a port town. Hamari residents have more than their fair share of those ghost stories. Most of them involve boats being ransacked by the ghosts in the fog, but that's only them trying to explain away the actions of no-name Pirates, natural disasters and incompetent sailors. Absolutely ridiculous."

She paused when Jiraiya had that look on his face when he was thinking really hard about something.

"Jiraiya-sama..." he looked up at her. "They *are* just ridiculous ghost

stories, aren't they?"

"But what if they *aren't*?" Jiraiya asked. "You said it yourself, 'it was like he teleported'. Everyone I've talked to has said pretty much the same thing: It was like he teleported. It was like he appeared out of thin air. His path always led to a dead end or simply vanished into thin air."

Jiraiya thought back to the conversation that he had with the teams who had been tasked with finding Zoro and Naruto.

"But this wasn't like that...accordin' to the scent trail he left behind. I was there with my Clan in the Forest of Death tryin' to track 'im down. One of my relatives explained how the Fourth's scent was left behind. There was a distinct smell of electrical energy. This was different. Roronoa's scent just ended, like he faded out."

"It's almost like he's a ghost, or something."

He was able to access areas that were locked and guarded with Genjutsu.

"My granpa told me and my bro these really weird ghost stories growin' up. One of his favorites to tell was how it was impossible to lock these ghosts out of places, and they'd sneak in and kill or kidnap you. It was often killing."

"My great-grandfather told me about these weird mist-ghosts who you absolutely didn't want to grab you, because if they did, they could rip you apart. Really freaked me out. I remember my mom was so pissed at him when I absolutely refused to sleep because it just so happened to get foggy that night."

He was possibly from Kiri, the Village hidden in the Mist.

"Apparitions of Mist."

"I think my great-grandfather called them 'Ghosts of the Bloody Void'? Something like that."

What else had they said?

"In attempt to enter the physical realm, the ghosts would end up tearing apart the potential host's body."

"The old man would tell my team those weird stories too when were out on

missions, except it involved the ghosts grabbing people and ripping apart their bodies as they got dragged away."

"...No, it was Kiri no Yuurei... Supposedly, the stories started with the Kiri locals and have become heavily saturated over time. There's a wide variety of folklore surrounding them, saying that they are spirits which lead people to their deaths if they ever get lost in the fog, or simply spirit them away."

"It can't be..." Jiraiya said out loud. Dammit! He was an idiot! Such a *stupid* idiot! *Why* hadn't it occurred to him or anyone else *sooner*?! Of course it wouldn't have. Why would anyone even consider someone to have the same abilities as the *Kiri no Yuurei* that inspired ghost stories? Every country had their own version of the *Kiri no Yuurei*, and the stories had been heavily saturated over time.

He remembered reading something somewhere about a rumored Clan from Kiri that either disappeared or died out overnight almost 200 years ago. *Was* it even possible? But for every urban or local legend and twisted tale, there was an element of truth or at least a sliver of inspiration behind them.

"I have to return to Konoha," Jiraiya said as he stood, looking very rigid. "We'll have to talk again sometime, Mayumi-san."

"Take care, Jiraiya-sama." Mayumi answered with a nod. "I hope you find your godson."

Jiraiya was out the door and on his way back to Konoha riding on the back of a large Toad in less than five minutes.

O0o0o0O

Evening was setting on Konoha, and it had been a quiet few months since Naruto was taken. Now that Naruto was gone, people actually began to notice the lack of his presence. There hadn't been any pranks or raucous laughter to follow. There were many people who were relieved that the Fox-Demon was gone; but there were those who surprisingly found themselves missing him; and others who missed his pranks and the boy himself.

Iruka was so beside himself with worry, it was disheartening to see.

Hiruzen stood on the roof of the Hokage Tower, smoking a pipe and relishing the too-quiet evening. How was Naruto doing? Was he scared? Was he safe?

Hiruzen's contemplating was interrupted by a large Toad landing on the roof with him.

"Jiraiya?"

He was quick to notice that a certain loud blond wasn't with him.

Jiraiya jumped off of the Toad and the large amphibian left in a puff of smoke.

"Sensei," Jiraiya looked serious. "Do you remember those ghost stories you told us on our first mission outside of the village?"

"Vaguely..." Hiruzen answered honestly, he had to chuckle. "I think now most of the people telling those stories are us old folk to our grandkids. Huh, I haven't thought about them in years." Hiruzen reminisced, "I remember telling you kids about them once you were fresh out of the academy... on your first mission outside the village." He smiled, as even Orochimaru had been unnerved... shaking his head of the memory, Hiruzen added, "They're the ghost stories of the Shinobi World."

"What were they called? I mean the Clan name. Do you know what they were called?"

"Hmm" This line of questioning was certainly odd. Hiruzen thought for a moment. "Well...I don't really recall. But over time, most people got to calling them strange things like, "Uchūōkā" but that was a name that didn't really make sense; rather, it was people expanding on the tale. Hell, some people got to calling them the "Bloody Ghost Clan." Unfortunately, I can't remember their Clan name, as such I probably couldn't even tell you if I *had* heard it..." Looking at Jiraiya, he questioned, "Why do you ask?"

"What happened to them?"

"Supposedly, they all died off in one of Kiri's violent civil wars, or some other battle, only to become the vengeful, blood-thirsty spirits of Kiri. Other stories say they became one with the blood mist itself in Kiri around two hundred years ago. One story even goes so far as to claim an entire battalion of Ninja simply disappeared in a thick fog that settled in.

"They were an incredibly secretive and elusive clan, so most of the information about them if it even existed at all, has been lost over time enough to become hearsay. I think they even inspired, what were

they called...? Oh, right, Kiri's *Kiri no Yuurei* stories. Of course, the stories about them have become more violent and irrational as time passed. Most people nowadays believe that they didn't even exist."

"Sensei, would it be too farfetched too think that Roronoa is one of those people who inspired the *Kiri no Yuurei* stories?"

Hiruzen visibly stiffened. He blinked a few times wondering if he had heard Jiraiya right. "What?"

"It's the only explanation that makes sense. After comparing what the other teams have reported, it lines up perfectly with the various bits of lore surrounding the... Ghosts. There's something else; Zoro was seen wearing a Kiri hitai-ate, but my contact doesn't believe that he's actually a Kiri-Nin. But one of the people that was described to me was a young teenage male with black hair."

"Do you think it could possibly be Gin the bookseller?" Hiruzen inquired.

"I don't know." Jiraiya answered honestly. "But it gets even stranger. I think Naruto disguised himself as a red-headed teenage girl."

"What?" Hiruzen said for a second time as he blinked and then blinked again as he wondered whether or not he had heard Jiraiya right.

"My contact said that the girl reminded her of Kushina, and that she had whisker marks."

"How would Naruto know what Kushina looked like?" It was a painful question to ask about someone concerning their late parents. Of course, neither of them could answer that question. Now, Hiruzen asked the question that was on both their minds: "Who told Naruto about his parents and why is Naruto cooperating with Zoro?"

Again, it was a question that didn't have an answer, and they didn't really want the worst of their imaginations to take them places in what ways Zoro was using to obtain Naruto's cooperation. Plus...who was working with Zoro out of Konoha?

"This is getting very complicated." Jiraiya crossed his arms. "It would make things easier if we knew for sure what Zoro's plans involving Naruto were, but no-one can say. If he was simply a Kiri-Nin, then we could *possibly* risk a war with Kiri – but that doesn't seem to be the case, here. My contact *didn't* think that Zoro was a Kiri-Nin, so it would be unwise to rush into any kind of war anyway."

Hiruzen nodded in understanding. Kiri-Nin didn't tan – plus, although Zoro had a rough and informal sounding dialect, he didn't have the same colloquial tendencies.

"Perhaps he's just posing as a Kiri-Nin." Hiruzen finally said. "It would more than easily throw people off of his trail."

"Perhaps..." Jiraiya sighed tiredly. "Where should we proceed from here?"

"Jiraiya..." Hiruzen turned to his old student. "Since it's the only information we have for now, I want you to go to learn whatever you can about the *Kiri no Yuurei*, keep in touch with your contacts, and if you must, be prepared to head to Kiri. That likely is the place Zoro is head to, given what we know about his abilities.

"While in Kiri, assess the situation there carefully. This situation has gotten very complicated... if Zoro truly is one of these... *Kiri no Yuurei*, then you *have* to approach with *extreme* caution. Also, with the rumors of a civil war brewing, I don't want Konoha to be pulled into the middle of something when it could have been avoided altogether. I don't want to go to war unless we *absolutely* have to."

"Understood."

"Also, check with Izumo and Kotetsu, perhaps buried within our records *somewhere* is information about the *Kiri no Yuurei* or whatever name they go by. Another thing: we need to know who revealed the truth to Naruto. That means there's an inside man to all of this."

Bowing, Jiraiya left to take care of everything before leaving again. Jiraiya was running on fumes now, he needed to rest, and for only a moment the man lamented he wasn't as young as he used to be. It was going to be a long evening, and after everything was over, he'd be buying a few rounds for the people in the research department.

Hopefully, his student's son was alright.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, big bro!Zoro is such a good influence, isn't he?

That ending... sorta just came outta nowhere. I actually didn't intend for it get like this, but that's where this whole situation led. So, I'll say "What a twist!"

While Zoro has his moments of genius, the Shinobi are giving him far too much credit... why did it take Zoro and Naruto so long to get where they were going? Well, for starters an eight-year-old was guiding a guy who "doesn't" get lost and they kept having to adjust their course. Plus, they had to stop for the occasional rest. Naruto's (and Gaara's) endurance has slowly built up, so they've needed to stop less and less.

Rasa is obviously going to keep very hush-hush about Gaara and the ANBU who died that night, and right now, his only focus is taking care of his village financially.

Uchūōkā – is sort of pulled from Uchū u~ōkā, which means "Spacewalker" as in a "outer space walker" so that's why that particular name doesn't really make sense. Also, forehead protector is such a long word and too troublesome to type in its entirety again and again, so hitai-ate it is from now on. Something else – briefly edited chapter 4 because after thinking about it, it just made more sense. Nothing too big, just decided to make it so money couldn't be offered as a bet for the arm wrestling competition, so Zoro really didn't have anything else to offer except his beloved sword.

A part of me is maybe considering a tumblr for special side-story fics. Ehhh...

8o8o8

Time for a bit of true and creepy history! - The Royal Norfolk Regiment - In 1915 during WW1, three British officers watched as a regimen of 250 men marched up a hill in Solvia Bay, Turkey and into a dense fog that settled on the ground. After the last man entered, the mist lifted to reveal that every last soldier had vanished. Their bodies were never found, and when the war ended, the British Government demanded their men back, only for Turkey to respond that they never encountered the soldiers at all. 0o0o0o

Oh, hey. Translations!

Kiri no Yuurei – Fog/Mist Ghost

Kusarigama – chain-sickle

Sabaku Kyuu – Sand Binding Coffin

Ronin – Masterless Samurai

Azuki – Red Bean Paste

Never Touch another Man's Booze, unless you're picking a Fight because you're a Dumbass with a Death Wish

Chapter Summary

The Uchiha cousins realize that someone else outside their Clan besides Kakashi has the Sharingan eye, and they wonder who it could possibly be. Jiraiya makes a startling discovery involving Zoro, and wonders how it could be plausible. Naruto writes a few letters for the cousins to deliver once they return to Konoha. Zoro, Naruto and Gaara finally arrive in Kiri, not long after the failed insurgent uprising and end up running into a bit of trouble.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the support, y'all. Seeing those emails are the equivalent of Kakashi getting the newest Icha-Icha book.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Being in ANBU and having connections to ROOT, both Itachi and Shisui were subject to secrets normal Shinobi outside of the organization either didn't or weren't supposed to know. Both cousins had met Rasa a few years ago during an ANBU mission to Suna, and they hadn't missed people talking about the "Sand Demon". Shisui had almost jokingly asked about the Demon, but aspects of Rasa reminded him a little too much of Uncle Fugaku, so he kept his mouth shut. They were on a mission anyway, so he had to keep an air of professionalism.

It was on that same day, that they witnessed a young, red-haired boy crush the leg of another boy – unwittingly, judging by his reaction. A blond-haired man quickly appeared by the boys' side, tending to the injured boy and whispering something to the redhead. The two Uchiha just so happened to notice Rasa, who had a disapproving frown on his face as he stood a few feet from them. It was easy to tell that the boy was his son, given how much he looked like his father.

Judging by the reactions of the people; there was no mistaking that this boy was Suna's resident Jinchuuriki, and they had heard horror stories that the kid was absolutely out-of-control and unstable. There wasn't anything they could do about it, and it was none of their

business, so the two masked Uchiha simply left to complete their mission.

Now, years later in present day, during their travels in search of Naruto's "kidnapper", they unexpectedly came upon the redhead once again. There was no mistaking it – Gaara resembled his father too much to say otherwise. But instead of the panicked and nervous boy they had seen years prior, it was a shy kid who smiled on occasion and had an aggressive streak if either Zoro or Naruto were threatened.

But realizing that Zoro now had *two* Jinchuuriki under his care... it was almost comical. Anyone else would probably be trying to unlock the secrets behind the Jinchuuriki's power. Instead, Zoro didn't even seem to care about the fact. He'd rather focus on training the boys like he trained, it seemed.

Speaking of which...

Neither Itachi nor Shisui knew exactly what to think about Zoro's idea of "training". This involved lifting giant barbells a few *thousand* times and telling the two Jinchuuriki under his care to aim for 1,000 sets in their workout routine before reaching 1,500...by next week.

"I wonder how strong Zoro is." Shisui whispered to Itachi, his eyes flashing red as he studied Zoro's movement. "I once heard that Tsunade-sama uses chakra control to enhance her strength, but Zoro seems like he's using pure, *physical* strength!"

Itachi had to agree. "I've never seen anything like it either. I almost wish we had a Hyuuga here to see how much chakra he's using, if at all."

It was truly fascinating. Because Zoro casually lifted his weights with his feet as he did a handstand while he did pushups. The two Uchiha wondered if Zoro would get along well with Might Guy, bonding over their crazy workout routines; or if Zoro's stern personality would clash with Guy's energetic one. Guy's rather one-sided rivalry with Kakashi was known all throughout Konoha, and Kakashi would probably appreciate not having Guy's attention on him for once.

There was also a testament to Zoro's strength and endurance when they saw numerous scars, old and more recent on his arms, back and torso. Without his shirt and standing upright, Shisui noticed something about Zoro, if only in the slightest way. His body proportions were somehow *off*. Zoro was well-toned, but his arms and legs seemed slightly disproportionate to the rest of him, but not really

in the "lanky-teenager" sort of way. His limbs were just slightly too long for that of the average person's.

Shisui watched as Zoro switched to pushing himself up and down with one hand, all while effortlessly maintaining his balance with those giant weights. Might Guy would most *definitely* want to challenge Zoro to something absolutely ridiculous if he ever saw a feat like this.

"Exactly how much are you lifting right now?" Shisui had to ask.

Motioning with his free hand to the dumbbells on his feet, Zoro spoke around the weight clenched in his teeth. "This one's about 2,500," then he nodded, motioning to the weight in his mouth, "This one's about 500."

Shisui decided not to wonder how Zoro spoke so clearly around the weight, so chalked it up to another one of his strange talents.

"So...is this what you lift normally?"

Zoro switched to his other hand. "Nah, this is actually a light workout."

"*Light?!*" Shisui cried out in surprise.

Even Itachi balked at that. It was in all honesty, lack of a better word; insane. Maybe it was for the best that Zoro and Guy never meet...

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The Kyuubi rolled his eyes irritably as Naruto prattled on about anything and everything. If Kyuubi wasn't going to talk, then Naruto figured he would. So Naruto talked about ramen. He talked about instant ramen and the irritation that preparing it took so long. He talked about the kinds of ramen that he liked the most and that he liked the least and why. He talked about how much ramen he ate that one time, it had to be a world record, Dattebayo! He talked about the art of ramen, hell, Naruto even went into its history.

Of course, Naruto had to tell Kyuubi about the first time he had tried ramen.

"I was five years old and *starving!* That was when old man Teuchi and Ayame-san called me over and gave me a meal on the house!"

The Kyuubi was so close to breaking his self-imposed vow of silence

just to shut up the brat. He in a sense, *had* been there, but by saying something he would only be encouraging the conversation. He had tried to kick Naruto out, but instead Naruto plopped himself down and braced for impact before settling into a comfortable position on a flat slab of rock and started yammering. Of course, Naruto tried asking questions to encourage conversation on Kyuubi's part, but the Fox simply refused to budge. Instead of being insulted, Naruto would just shrug and continue talking.

"If you don't wanna talk, you don't have to! I can talk plenty for both of us, Dattebayo!"

Finally, when Naruto had run out ammo for everything ramen, he stood up and waved to Kuubi, an irritating blinding grin on his face.

"Nice chatting with you, Kyuubi! I'll get your name, next time! I'll see you later, okay? Bye!"

"Wait one minute, brat."

"Huh?" Naruto stopped and looked up at Kyuubi. He smiled excitedly. "Are you gonna tell me your name?"

"No." Naruto frowned, and was about to complain and argue when Kyuubi continued. At first, he had decided to keep silent, but then the Uchiha had come along and stuck around. **"Don't trust those Uchiha bastards."**

"What? Why not?"

"Their red eyes; the Sharingan. They are dangerous."

"But they're helping us."

"Are they really? Maybe they're just biding their time."

"To do what?" Naruto looked up at Kyuubi, a sad expression on his face. Then he became annoyed. "Why don't you trust them?"

Sighing and grumbling under his breath, the Kyuubi answered, **"Eight years ago, I *didn't* want to attack Konoha. I would've high-tailed it out of there first chance I got, but a masked bastard with the eye of an Uchiha forced me to do it."**

"What?!" Naruto shouted. "Then everyone— my parents..." Naruto clenched his fists. He was slowly coming to the same conclusion that

had the Kyuubi only slightly worried.

"How should I warn Zoro-nii and Gaara?"

"I don't know, I don't care. As my prison, it's my unfortunate job to make sure you don't die."

"As troublesome as it is," went left unsaid. Naruto was torn. Should he listen to Kyuubi and not trust them at all? Should he trust them? They *were* helping them. How should he warn Zoro? What should he do? The questions buzzed around Naruto's mind.

"I would recommend getting away from them as fast as possible. Avoid looking into their eyes."

"Okay..." Naruto forced a smile. "See you later, Kyuubi. Tell me your name then!"

Kyuubi groaned after his host left. He was feeling antsy, because of the two Uchiha –neither of them had tried anything... yet. But Kyuubi was prepared to somehow attack if he had to, consequences be damned. The foolish Humans seemed to trust the Uchiha, and while the pair did pull his container and the other one aside, still, neither of them had tried anything. Kyuubi was not stupid enough to trust easily. At least he had managed to place a reasonable seed of doubt in Naruto's mind.

The only solace he had in this situation was knowing that his stupid younger brother was probably suffering a similar treatment.

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The moment Ichibi found that he could open his eyes, he leveled his best glare at Gaara.

"Hello, Ichibi." Gaara greeted pleasantly. "I would like to...chat. Can we—"

Gaara was cut off by Ichibi screeching and wrenching in his binds. **"F**K YOU! GO SUCK A F**KING D**K YOU LITTLE —"** Ichibi stopped when he found himself getting surrounded by that sphere of water once again. **"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"**

"I just want to talk." Gaara said quietly. "If you aren't willing to do that, then there's no reason to keep you awake. I'll be back later. Sorry for bothering you."

And with that, Ichibi's world was plunged into darkness once again. He bitched and moaned and cursed Zoro, Naruto, Kyuubi, and especially Gaara. To have his power taken from him by a mere child... Ichibi was *pissed*. He absolutely *did not* want to have anything to do with Gaara. The brat was nothing more than his prison vessel, and was also the key to letting him out! Why wouldn't Gaara just *let him out*?!

So Ichibi sulked. He decided to re-watch some of Gaara's memories and until he could watch the newest ones once they were available to him. He hoped that his stupid older brother was just as miserable as he was.

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Naruto came out of his mindscape to see that Zoro was lifting weights while talking with Shisui. The boy slowly stood up. What should he do? He decided that he would try to act as normal as possible and warn Zoro and Gaara.

But there was a slight problem: Naruto's acting skills were just fine when he was denying the prank he either generated or took part in. It was another thing entirely to subtly pretend that everything was okay when it absolutely wasn't.

"Naruto-kun." Itachi greeted as Naruto approached.

"H-hey!" Naruto waved awkwardly with a big, dopey grin on his face. "How's life? Welp, w-would you look at the time, Dattebayo? Gotta run!"

Itachi quirked an eyebrow at Naruto's odd sudden change in behavior. He watched as the boy made his way over to Gaara, casting anxious glances back at him.

Within the confines of Naruto's mindscape, Kyuubi groaned and buried his muzzle in his paws at the painful awkwardness and Naruto's idea of 'subtle'.

8o8o8

While they rested briefly, Naruto and Gaara both tried to "talk" with their Bijuu. Again, fascinating. Zoro's views on the Bijuu was unique, and he clearly didn't see any harm in either of the boys interacting with their Bijuu when people would have discouraged any interaction whatsoever until the Jinchuuriki was in their mid-to-late teens. Gaara

was in-and-out in fifteen minutes looking mildly irritated, while Naruto was out for almost two-and-a-half hours. While they waited for Naruto, again, the two Uchiha were witness to Zoro's eccentric ways.

Zoro and Gaara stood across from each other, while Zoro was telling Gaara what to do.

"Try and control your sand shield to a specific point," Zoro instructed as he held a pair of bokutō. "Instead of it rising up all at once, you're gonna try to direct the sand to wherever the strike is coming. After you master that, then we'll work on offense."

"Alright, Zoro-nii." Gaara agreed. He knew he had to learn offense at some point, but he was glad that Zoro wasn't pushing it on him.

It was an interesting way of learning control. Gaara had been so used to his shield responding *for* him that not once had he ever thought about controlling *where* it went and *when* it activated. He now had to concentrate to *not* let it rise up. Zoro went slow, simply sticking one of the bokutō within Gaara's shield range so that he could block the "attack". But it was tiring and frustrating that he couldn't get it.

Zoro frowned at him. "You've only been at this for an hour; you can't expect to get it right away."

"Agreed." Itachi said. "You're trying to add a new system to a technique that's been with you for years. You've never had the need to change before, and now that you must, you're realizing the difficulties that come with it. It will take more than just an hour of practice to master."

"Do you mind if we steal Gaara away for a bit while we teach him some Jutsu?" Shisui asked with a grin.

Gaara looked hesitant at the "stealing him away" comment, but Zoro didn't seem worried.

"Go ahead." Zoro then said, "Oh, yeah, almost forgot." He then presented the Uchiha with the bag full of scrolls that contained a good number of Jutsu, and added off-handedly, "There are only a few of these I can actually use, so do whatever you want with these."

That was an odd comment in Itachi's opinion, but he'd dwell on it later.

Gaara of course, was a natural at earth-based Jutsu, and very nearly

had the first one (almost any ANBU's personal favorite) *Doton: Shinjū Zanshu no Jutsu* within the hour.

"You better rest up, Gaara-kun." Shisui said with a smile. "We can practice some more, later."

Naruto was up soon afterward, and for the three teens, they quickly noticed how odd Naruto was acting towards the two Uchiha. At one moment, he seemed to forget whatever it was that involved the cousins, and he was excited that he had talked to the Kyuubi. Well, talked *at* him, because the Kyuubi refused to say a word, but Naruto refused to give up. "I *will* have the Kyuubi's name, believe it! Our names'll be famous throughout the world, Dattebayo!"

"You think the Kyuubi has a name?" Itachi asked in good humor.

"Why wouldn't he?" Naruto answered, as if it were the most obvious thing ever. But then, Naruto quickly averted his gaze and focused on his shoes.

"Hn," Itachi gave the boy a small smile. "You're an interesting one, Naruto-kun."

Naruto silently nodded.

"What's with you, brat?"

Naruto sent the cousins a wary glance before shrugging.

Zoro sighed, wondering what the kid's problem was, and he noticed that even Gaara was now sending the cousins wary and almost dangerous glances. Crossing his arms in irritation, Zoro finally called the pair out.

"Alright, what the hell is with you two?"

Gaara didn't say anything, but instead, Naruto jumped up and pointed an accusing finger at the cousins. "They're dangerous! Kyuubi told me! Their eyes can control people! He said that a masked man with a red eye forced him to destroy Konoha!"

"What?!" Shisui shouted, while Itachi's own surprised question was much more reserved.

"Are you sure?" Itachi asked, his usual impassive mask dropping and he looked slightly worried as his eyes flashed red. "Are you absolutely

positive?"

"That's quite an accusation..." Zoro muttered, but he subtly reached for Wado Ichimonji almost subconsciously.

Shisui turned to Itachi, asking, "Who could it have been?"

Itachi put a finger to his chin in thought. Very seriously, he said to Naruto, "You said that the Kyuubi said a 'man with a red eye' forced him to attack Konoha. Which eye possessed the Sharingan?"

Naruto was silent for a moment, and looked briefly annoyed before finally answering, "The right side."

Now, both cousins looked really uncomfortable. That quickly ruled out Kakashi, who Itachi didn't suspect, and only asked because he was hoping he was wrong – and he was very glad that he was. But the Uchiha were very concerned.

Someone had *their* eye, and they had no idea who.

"That...is not very good news." Itachi said, his red eyes slowly showing themselves in his anger, and Shisui wasn't any better.

"This means someone stole it!" Shisui stood, absolutely furious. "If it hadn't been for that bastard, then the village wouldn't be—"

"Shisui, enough!" Itachi said, poking Shisui in the leg. Shisui glowered, but he silently flopped back onto the ground with a huff. The cousins could calm each other down easily enough.

"Sorry about that..." Shisui gave a weak laugh, scratching the back of his head. "It just pisses me off knowing that someone used our eyes like that..."

"It's also a matter of deep concern." Itachi spoke quietly, his eyes now returning to their usual black. "Our Sharingan holds many secrets – one of them being that very technique. But..."

"But?" Zoro quirked an eyebrow.

"Something's not adding up." Shisui frowned. "Upon death, there's a special technique we use to destroy the eyes; family secrets and all. So far, only one person outside of the Uchiha has an eye – and no Uchiha has died out in the field without being recovered, other than a little over eight-and-a-half years ago. One of our cousins was killed in a

freak accident, but he gave his left eye to a friend that had lost his own. Our family couldn't get his body back because it had been buried in a cave-in. They were *really* pissed with his team members about that. But no-one could do anything, so they just left it as a sort of unmarked grave."

The only people to know about Obito's grave had been his team members, the Uchiha, and the Hokage. Numerous Uchiha were beyond pissed that Kakashi had "stolen" the eye, even though both he and Jin had said otherwise. It was obvious to him that Kakashi had been changed by Obito's death, and Kakashi had admitted that "it had been his fault" and was extremely apologetic. Even so, his family wouldn't let Kakashi attend the funeral.

"Someone must have dug him out and stole the eye, but..." Shisui shook his head. "This doesn't make much sense, because whoever it was would have had their chakra drained like crazy and quite possibly killed themselves, because they aren't of Uchiha blood."

Kakashi couldn't use his eye without severely draining his chakra; and depending on how long he used the eye and what he used it for, Kakashi would be bedridden for almost a week. Whoever took control of the Kyuubi more than likely would have killed themselves in the attempt.

"But it was a successful control, wasn't it?" Zoro questioned.

"But *was* it?" Shisui frowned. Why had the person attacked? Had the Fourth and his wife been the real targets all along? The Kyuubi was the perfect, albeit extreme cover for killing them. If the perpetrator had intended to use the Kyuubi to kill them, how did he or she know it would be successful? Or had the Kyuubi been the real target, and Minato and Kushina were simply in the way? All the more reason to keep Naruto out of Konoha and on the move.

"That's where..." Itachi frowned. There weren't any one-eyed Uchiha wandering around the village, and no-one else besides Kakashi had an Uchiha eye... and among the dead, a one-eyed Uchiha wasn't one of them. Turning to his cousin, Itachi did not look the slightest bit happy. "Shisui...the mask could have been a way to throw people off. Make them think it's someone from the outside."

"Danzo?" Shisui asked. He was asking much more than that. What if Danzo had turned an Uchiha against the family? But no Uchiha with any amount of pride would join ROOT willingly, much to Danzo's

disappointment, so Itachi shook his head. Which again, left them with wondering who had used their eyes to control the Kyuubi? It hadn't been any of the Uchiha, because each one of them had been accounted for. Or at least, both Itachi and Shisui had thought so.

They knew that Danzo had played them, and they couldn't call him out without causing unnecessary and dangerous trouble for themselves. Danzo was in all likelihood just waiting for them to publically call him out if someone was dumb enough to do so. No Uchiha in their right mind would willingly help Danzo. Danzo had only managed to get Itachi where he was by treating various people like Shogi pieces and had forced the Uchiha into a position that he couldn't wriggle his way out of without risk to himself or family members.

"We should be going now." Itachi said stiffly as he stood. Turning to Naruto, he said, "I don't know who is responsible for this, but please believe me when I say that I am truly sorry."

The blond could see the genuine regret that was on Itachi and Shisui's features. He had wished for a family for so long, and had often wondered if his parents had either died or abandoned him because he was a "monster." But now, he was with Zoro and Gaara. He knew the truth about his parents months ago; and he finally had the family he had wished for.

Naruto flashed a blinding grin. "It's okay! You guys are really cool."

The blond ignored Kyuubi growling at him about his stupidity, and trusting so quickly and easily; but Naruto had already decided that he liked the Uchiha cousins, and felt silly for thinking them dangerous to him and his brothers.

"Naruto," it was now Zoro's turn to be serious. "Listen, I don't know how much of that you got, but it will be a long while before you can return to Konoha, got it?"

"How long?"

Zoro just shrugged.

It was an acceptable answer for Naruto, as he was thinking that he would eventually like to see Konoha again. It would probably be years, as he didn't intend to return any time soon. He wanted to stay with his brothers; so waiting awhile would be alright with him.

Itachi leaned over to Zoro so that he could whisper.

"Zoro-san," Itachi looked grim as he spoke. "This is yet another selfish request, but I ask that you not tell anyone about the Uchiha's involvement with the Kyuubi eight years ago... I'm not sure who we can trust. There are only a select few I trust without a doubt that would not have anything to do with something like this, but I don't want something potentially getting back to the wrong person."

"Yeah, sure."

Zoro accepted a little too easily for Itachi's comfort, but he had to trust that the older teen would know what he was doing.

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It was mid-morning when the group came upon an open area that gave them a clear view of the ocean, along with being able to see Nagi Island in the distance. The two boys stared out at the ocean, watching the crying seagulls ride the wind currents.

Naruto whooped and shouted, "C'mon, Gaara! Let's race to that rocky place! Loser has to play a punishment game!"

Gaara grinned at Naruto. "Okay."

The two boys took off, racing ahead. None of the teens bothered to stop them, because they were simply kids being kids. There wasn't anyone around them for miles, and if someone was foolish enough to try to attack the boys, they had two Uchiha and Zoro to worry about.

As their group walked, it gave Itachi a chance to ask Zoro about his comment from earlier. Because although someone didn't necessarily have the affinity for a certain element due to their chakra nature, that didn't mean they couldn't learn a certain type of Jutsu. Kakashi was a testament to that fact.

Zoro was currently staring out at the ocean, looking at something off in the distance.

"Zoro-kun," Itachi said.

"Huh?" Zoro answered in his brusque manner.

"I was curious about something: earlier, you made the comment of there being only a few of the Jutsu those scrolls contained. What did

you mean by that?" Upon seeing Zoro's expression, Itachi added, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

Zoro shrugged. "It's just that certain ones come easier. I quit trying to learn some of the other ones when it was clear I wasn't going to improve on them."

The Uchiha glanced curiously at Zoro, because the teen didn't strike them as a quitter. Again, an odd statement that offered no real or clear explanation.

Honestly, Zoro didn't want to try and explain to the cousins his... well, it couldn't really be considered handicaps. It was just complicated trying to explain to people why his abilities concerning Jutsu worked the way they did. Of course, Koshiro had told him not to reveal too much about what he could and couldn't do – so the two Uchiha only got the bare minimum.

His earth-based Jutsu just simply crumbled, no matter how many times he had tried in the past. He couldn't henge for shit and could only manage one water elemental clone at a time. Two, if he was lucky.

Because his attacks were primarily sword-based, he excelled in using Jutsu that complimented his swords, such as wind, and being a water-element user just came naturally. He *could* do that whole, 'hiding-in-mist' Jutsu, but rarely used it because when facing a fellow-swordsman, such underhanded attacks was beneath him.

"I know when to quit." Zoro huffed under the Uchiha's scrutinizing and amused gazes.

Itachi suppressed a smile in amusement at the lie. Zoro was still a kid in some ways.

"So, out of curiosity," Shisui said with a smile, "...what's your Kekkei Genkai?"

Zoro visibly stiffened, and stopped walking. He turned back to the cousins, obviously refusing to look either of them in the eye, and instead opted to look at the ground.

"I..." Zoro huffed. He started walking again. "It's nothing special. I just... move really fast or something."

It was a partial lie on Zoro's part, Itachi noted. Either Zoro wouldn't

say, or he couldn't. As to why either of those options were, Itachi wasn't going to push. He and his cousin *were* making a selfish request, after all.

"That's interesting," commented Shisui genuinely, ignoring Zoro's odd behavior. Well... *everything* about Zoro was odd.

There had been something about Zoro that perturbed Itachi. Not in 'he can't be trusted' sort of way, but just how utterly *off* Zoro was. He had never known anyone to have green hair or silver eyes like Zoro did. Plus, Shisui had briefly sparred with Zoro and witnessing his Kekkei Genkai with the Sharingan... Itachi was reminded of the stories his grandfather and some of the older generations and his older cousins told him about 'Ghosts that hailed from Kiri'. But those had just been stories, or at least he had thought so. Zoro was intent on reaching Kiri, but he didn't strike Itachi as someone who was on any kind of mission of revenge.

There was also the fact that Zoro's dialect didn't match up with *any* of the surrounding countries. He claimed to be from Fire Country, but his vernacular was only *slightly* similar, compared to Konoha locals. And while he had a gruff and casual way of speaking like Kiri-locals did, it just wasn't the same. It was like someone had combined the two dialects into a poor pseudo-imitation of the two countries' local vernaculars.

"Zoro-san," Itachi began, "if you don't mind my asking, where are you from?"

"A small town in Fire Country." Zoro replied impassively with an annoyed scowl as he started walking again.

Itachi got the slightest impression that Zoro didn't like talking about where he was from. As to why that was, Itachi couldn't be certain. Did Zoro think that the 'almighty Uchiha' would look down on him for being from a poor, no-name town?

Shisui also spotted Zoro's discomfort, and with a mischievous grin, he poked Zoro's cheek with a finger as he threw an arm around the teen's shoulders.

"Aw, look, Itachi-san! The country bumpkin Zoro-kun has come so far in the world, hasn't he?"

Shisui continued his prodding while Zoro glared kunai at him.

"Leaving a small-time village to become an awesome Kenjutsu-user

and Bounty Hunter – and now look at him! He has two adorable kids!"

"Stop poking me!" Zoro shouted, shoving Shisui's hand away, and pulling himself out from under Shisui's arm.

Shisui only laughed in response to Zoro's annoyed glare. He walked ahead, and turned slightly to look at Zoro. "So, do you intend to stay in Kiri after this?"

Zoro didn't answer right away. He glanced down at the ground, thinking for a moment before looking out at the horizon again. Zoro stopped walking again, silently prompting the two who were with him to pause as well.

"No, I don't."

"Then where are you going to go from there?" Shisui asked. His unspoken worry also asked the question of what Zoro intended to do to keep Naruto out of Konoha for an extended period of time without getting caught.

"I intend on finding the strongest swordsman in the world." Zoro answered simply.

Itachi furrowed his eyebrows. Was Zoro's intent for heading to Kiri to find one, if not all of the Seven Swordsmen? "And who would that be? Kiri's famous for its Kenjutsu users."

Zoro was silent again before responding, "The strongest swordsman isn't *in* Kiri."

Shisui looked confused. "What do you mean by that?"

Zoro nodded his head towards the ocean. "Out there."

Now, both Uchiha were confused.

"Out *where*?" Itachi asked, admittedly feeling slightly frustrated at Zoro's confusing half-answers.

Zoro wondered if it would be the right thing to tell them. It really wasn't fair of him to be this dodgy, because the cousins were helping him out. But again, this whole situation wasn't fair.

"...There's something I have to tell you." Zoro finally said after not saying a word for what felt like too long.

Naruto and Gaara had run several yards ahead, and were clamoring on the rocks. They both climbed up to a certain point on the rocks, giving them a clear view of their surroundings.

"Isn't it amazing?" Naruto asked.

Gaara nodded, "Hmm," enjoying the feeling of the wind whipping around them. Their short time in Hamari and on that one boat hadn't done the view of the ocean any justice. The ocean bordering that port town had been dull and gray, while the ocean here was a dark shade of blue.

The other three who were with them had hung back, talking about something.

The boys took the time to explore, and Gaara found a conch shell almost as big as his fist hidden among the rocks. Naruto came across a starfish that was hidden in the nearby shallows, before moving on to find something else in his excitement.

Zoro, Itachi and Shisui were making their way towards them now, their expressions weren't exactly happy-looking.

Naruto grinned when he spotted them. "Hey, slowpokes, 'ttebayo! Keep up, will ya!"

"We've been climbing the rocks!" Gaara said, his voice surprisingly loud. It was probably only due to the wind and the roar of the ocean, but it was the loudest the boy had ever been on his own, and there was a smile on his face that showed excitement. "Hurry up and come see what we found!"

"Coming, brats!" Zoro called back in a good-natured tone. "Don't get your underpants in a twist!"

Turning to look at the cousins, Zoro's usual scowl was replaced by one of frustration and even helplessness – and he was clearly very annoyed by it. "No one deserves a life like this."

The Uchiha gave Zoro a look that showed something akin to understanding.

Zoro's expression was back to his neutral one as he made his way towards the boys. "What'd you find?"

"Look at this!" Naruto pointed at something on the ground, only to abruptly cry out in pain.

Naruto began flailing his hand around; a small crab attached to his finger with a vice-like grip. Naruto started sobbing when the crab only gripped his appendage that much harder, and Gaara looked on, unsure of what he should do.

Zoro moved quickly and grabbed Naruto.

"Zoro-nii..." Naruto sniffled, as he held up his tiny aggressor. "The crab!"

"Hmm, that looks bad," Zoro said seriously as he picked up the boy and started carrying Naruto towards the water. "We'll have to cut the finger off."

Naruto went wide-eyed before beginning a new set of panicked wails. Rolling his eyes in a mix of mild exasperation and amusement, Zoro grabbed Naruto's crab-clamped hand and knelt down by the water's edge and thrust the boy's hand in. Within seconds, the crab detached itself and disappeared somewhere in the murky depths.

Naruto pulled his hand out of the water and blinked a few times as he looked at his finger before looking at Zoro who was smirking at him.

"You dumbass!" Naruto started hitting Zoro's arms and chest with his fists, but Zoro simply pushed Naruto away by his forehead and kept him at arm's length as the boy floundered, complained and cursed.

Gaara was staring wide-eyed at Zoro and Naruto. A very pleased with himself Zoro easily detained Naruto, with a casual last glance at the blond, he turned to Gaara.

"What else did you find?"

"Hee, hee." Gaara giggled, covering his mouth as he did so. It was rare for him to ever laugh, and it was the first time either Naruto or Zoro had heard him do so. It actually got Naruto to stop trying to hit Zoro and the teen to let go of Naruto. Glancing at an amused Zoro and an annoyed Naruto, Gaara pointed to a section of the rocks.

Gaara held out the conch shell. He was quiet again, seeming to realize that he had been much louder and more open with his emotions than how he normally was. "I found this..." looking at the shell for a moment, he glanced back to Zoro. "Can I keep it?"

"Don't see why not,"

Gaara beamed up at him, causing Zoro to scratch the back of his head feeling slightly awkward. The kid was looking at him with an expression that Zoro never received from kids Gaara's age, thus he didn't really know how to respond. It was just a seashell, but Gaara was looking at him as if he had given the kid something irreplaceable.

"So, uh...did you find anything else?"

"There's a bird's nest there, with babies." The redhead pointed towards a high point on the rocks. "It's the first time I've ever seen one."

"Let's go look at them." Zoro said quickly as he stood and walked towards Gaara, Naruto following close behind.

"Okay." Gaara responded happily, gripping Zoro's hand.

The teen glanced down at Gaara, and inwardly sighed. It was at that moment Zoro realized just how much the two brats had grown on him – sort of like a weird fungus. But now, Zoro also realized that he was probably the only thing these two kids had. He had never been needed by anyone before – not like this. But it brought out a sense of belonging? Was that the right word for it?

Gaara led Zoro up the rocks towards the bird's nest, and once they had a clear view of the birds, Gaara was asking Zoro questions about them.

"What kind of birds are they?"

"I *think* it's a type of fisher..." Zoro pointed to a flock of gray birds further down the rocky coast. "That's what they'll look like when they grow up."

Gaara frowned at the adult version of the birds. "...They're kind of ugly. I wish they would stay small like this."

"...They *are* kinda ugly, aren't they?" Zoro agreed.

The two Uchiha observed the exchanges between the two boys and Zoro with their own amusement. Naruto and Gaara would be fine under Zoro's care, as unconventional as it was.

-0-0-0-

There was a Kiri fishing boat a few miles from the coast as they neared the oceanic border between Fire Country and Wave, and they

flagged the small crew down easily enough. At first, there had been some concern from the fishermen – they were outside of their permitted territory. But the fish in this region were bigger and tasted fresher.

The captain of the vessel, a gruff, older man named Rokubari, was ready to split and hope that his tiny vessel could somehow outrun the Konoha-Nin who would likely give chase for his audacity. But then, his eyes fell on one of the older two of the gathered teens and he noticed the Kiri forehead protector along with the line that went through it.

They pulled their vessel a little closer, but not much. He was only willing to get close enough so that they wouldn't really have to shout to hear each other; and him not risk getting his boat beached or ripped apart by rocks.

Swallowing and taking in a deep breath, Rokubari smiled with a nervous grimace, hoping his nervousness wouldn't show. "How may I help you boys?"

The teen with the Kiri-forehead protector spoke up, in every Kiri-Nin's usual gruff manner. "I'd like a ride to Kiri. And we aren't free loaders, so we'll help out until we reach Kiri."

Sighing, he didn't want to earn the ire of the rogue-Nin, so with a warning glance back to his small crew, he permitted the teen to come aboard. "Sure, climb on board. Do you need someone to row out to you?"

"No need," the teen replied.

The teen turned to say something to the other two who were with him, and they both nodded their heads. The boys both said their goodbyes as well, and then the rogue-Nin easily picked the two boys; one under each arm and ran across the water before climbing onto their boat.

Rokubari silently cursed under his breath, every possible reason for a rogue Kiri-Nin wanting to return to the homeland he had betrayed running through his mind – especially when he had two little kids in tow.

Zoro gave the men a polite nod, saying, "I'm Zoro, these brats are Naruto and Gaara."

At that moment, Jiraiya, Izumo, and Kotetsu were neck-deep in dusty scrolls and files that involved anything from Kiri. They had one small team of three people was looking into Kiri's history, and none of them were surprised to see that it was a very bloody one. But the thing that particular team was looking for was any information pertaining to the *Kiri no Yuurei*, and some of that involved looking into missions.

The filing system for missions was organized by sections, "A", "B", "C" "D" "S" and "Classified" meaning only someone like the Hokage had the authority to open it by using his or her chakra. The files were then broken down by what country the missions had taken place.

For clans, especially those who had Kekkei Genkai, they of course were organized by country, and were alphabetized. Each section had a good number of scrolls that contained known information of existing or now extinct clans. It was grueling work, but they could root out the obvious ones whose abilities were well-known enough to not qualify as being one of the *Kiri no Yuurei*. They were able to narrow it down even more by filtering out the near-extinct to completely eliminated clans that once resided in Kiri.

In between Jiraiya, Izumo, and Kotetsu, that left roughly forty scrolls. So they each picked a scroll and decided that they would meet somewhere in the middle.

It felt like hours later when Izumo picked up a scroll that had faded characters on it, and he tiredly blinked at the barely legible characters written on it. Whatever else had been written was unreadable. Fortunately, the contents of the scroll was thoroughly intact. He began skimming the information pertaining to an extinct Clan called Kūhaku when he froze.

Getting the attention of the others, he said, "I think I found the Clan."

Jiraiya and Kotetsu, along with the others, quickly stopped what they were doing and joined Izumo in reading the scroll.

"The Kūhaku Clan are of the most curious sort. They are closed off and secretive, even from those in Kirigakure. It is said that they don't even reside in Kirigakure, but rather someplace else and act independently, and have done so for generations. As to why this is, is currently unknown.

Their Kekkei Genkai is a powerful and dangerous one.

They have been called Demons, Ghosts, Blood Phantoms and a number of other things due to their violent nature and properties of their Kekkei Genkai. A thick mist on a battlefield with a Kūhaku present is said to be a death sentence. The only reason there are those left alive and intact is very likely only because that person was not their intended target.'

Jiraiya skipped ahead a few paragraphs frowning at what he read.

'Known abilities of Kūhaku:

They make perfect guides if you are ever in a situation where you have the potential to get lost i.e. various Genjutsu and labyrinths used as security measures are ineffective.

Notes – 1. A. Please refer to the notes below. Possible connections to thefts around the Elemental Nations.

1. B. Please refer to the notes below. Contains details on various missions where a Kūhaku acted as a guide.

There are claims that they can enter locked buildings without using the door.

Notes - 2. A. Please refer to the notes below. Possible connections to various assassinations and thefts around the Elemental Nations. See notes 1. A.

They have the odd ability of what can best be described as 'teleporting'. They are best described as "fading-out" or "fading-in".

There are claims of various Genjutsu being completely ineffective against them. What these Genjutsu are is currently unknown.

Notes 3. A. Please refer to the notes below to learn which Genjutsu may or may not be effective. (Notes may be incomplete)

Unfortunately, as of this time, we do not have any more information.'

Jiraiya didn't like this one bit. The description (albeit vague) fit him just about perfectly. But Zoro didn't look like the typical Kiri-Nin, unless he had been wearing a disguise the entire time. His thoughts were interrupted by someone speaking.

"Look here," Kotetsu sounded slightly strained as he pointed to the last

thing that was written.

'Kiri has had yet another war with one of the other Elemental Nations (Iwa). It was during this confrontation that the Kūhaku were said to be completely eliminated. From what evidence we have gathered, it is believed that the Kuhaku Clan is now extinct. There have been no further details as of this time.'

"...This was last updated 185 years ago."

"It can't be..." Jiraiya breathed. "This doesn't make sense. Something's not adding up here. The supposedly dead Kūhaku have been gone for *this* long, and suddenly they decide the time to strike is *now*?"

"Perhaps the Clan's Kekkei Genkai went extinct only to suddenly show itself in Roronoa?" Izumo provided.

"It could be." Jiraiya said.

It had been known to happen. A Clan's Kekkei Genkai could suddenly end due to whatever circumstances caused it to happen. Factors such as various diseases that targeted aspects of the Kekkei Genkai and incestuous marriages between cousins and half-siblings often played major roles.

But then a member of that Clan whose Kekkei Genkai was supposedly now extinct could have a child with someone outside of the Clan whose genetics somehow opened the door for the Kekkei Genkai to be completely revitalized.

Jiraiya racked his brain as he tried to think about what all of this information meant. Had Kiri lied about losing one of its Clans? He quickly shoved that thought aside, as it lacked any form of sound logic. With all the talk of civil war and Blood Purges in Kiri, they'd want every advantage they could get; and from what little they had read, the Kūhaku could easily turn the tides in the opposition's favor. Although it was highly doubtful that just one would be enough.

But it didn't explain why Zoro wheedled his way around for over a year just to escape with Naruto. Unless he was planning to use the Kyuubi to commit a coup in Kiri. Jiraiya was thinking in circles. None of it added up or explained *why*. Had the Kūhaku been in hiding? No, that was ridiculous. Was Zoro going to attack Kiri? Again, that brought up the question as to *how* Zoro *knew* who *Naruto* was.

None of it made sense when he thought about it, and any theories that

he could come up with sounded good at first until he easily found the flaws and refuted them with common sense.

The others sat in somewhat awkward silence as Jiraiya thoughtfully glared holes into the old scroll. One of the women cleared her throat, getting Jiraiya's attention.

"So...what are you going to do now?"

"Hunt him down, of course." Jiraiya said with determination. "And bring Naruto home where he belongs." With renewed vigor, Jiraiya called out, "Alright everyone, now that we know what we're looking for, let's gather all the information we can about the Kūhaku! We're on a time crunch, so let's get to it!"

A chorus of various '*Hai!*' answered him.

Fortunately, all they needed to do was look up the various files that the scroll pertaining to the Kūhaku listed in its note margins. Just in case (and in a need to be more thorough) they also looked up the various cases in which Konoha teamed up with Kiri. Those moments were few and far between; but when they did show up, it was often because the Kūhaku were involved.

0*0*0

While the members of the research team snored away in much deserved rest, Jiraiya was only resting until the wee hours of the next day and he would then be heading to Kiri. He had compiled extensive notes pertaining to the Kūhaku, and had found a few interesting things.

The Kūhaku were notorious for taking people, man or woman; but mainly children – war orphans or people who had no family to claim as their own, only to disappear never to be seen again. From what the team had gathered upon discovering this was that the Kūhaku held no interest in any of the Kekkei Genkai Clans or whatever secrets Konoha (or any other country for that matter) had to offer.

Proving that a good bit of Konoha folklore had been influenced by the long-last Clan in more ways than one, more ridiculous storytelling soon followed, this time, the stories involved ghostly apparitions kidnapping the eligible women during foggy nights in light of the full moon to bear their children, and the women were never seen or heard from again. The story played on people's superstitions and had even pressured the more superstitious people into getting married early in

life.

In another version, men would be lured to their deaths by beauties appearing out of the darkness on foggy nights.

The two women assisting them had to laugh. "So *that's* where those ridiculous stories came from!"

O-O-O

Iruka was downtrodden, worrying for Naruto. Was he alright? Iruka had never had a personal encounter with Zoro, but he had heard the stories from people; how the teen scowled at the world, and was a skilled Kenjutsu user. Zoro was around his age, give or take a few years, and Iruka didn't know what he would do if ever met Zoro face-to-face.

Given that he was still a Chuunin, and Zoro had gone after Jonin-level missing-Nin, his chances of winning in fight against someone like Zoro was pretty much down to zero.

Iruka bumped into his office at the academy, even though he already had a few cups of caffeine. He had to deal with a few reports and grading papers, and had already been mindlessly managing the task when he finally noticed a messenger scroll sitting amongst the various organized stacks of papers.

Sighing, thinking that it was probably some parent's complaint about one thing or another, Iruka figured he'd get it over with, as he wasn't really focusing on grading those papers anyway. His eyes widened when he saw that it was addressed to him. It wasn't the fact that it had his name on it that gave Iruka pause; but rather the fact *how* his name was written. It was Naruto's handwriting! Now, he was wondering who had delivered it, and even why.

Keeping calm, in spite of the fact he wanted to rip the scroll open and read its contents, he had to check for traps. There seemed to be none, as far as he could tell. So quickly (but still carefully) Iruka opened the scroll to see Naruto's childish scrawl written on it.

There was something rather curious about the letter, Iruka noticed. The writing was definitely Naruto's, but there were times when unfamiliar handwriting appeared. It was somewhat messy, but still legible. Upon studying the strokes, the writer was left-handed. But the interesting bit was that whoever had written the characters, Naruto's messy handwriting had copied them.

Someone had shown Naruto how to write those characters for what he wanted to say, and Naruto had copied, wanting to write the characters for himself.

A few characters had been messily crossed-out due to some sort of mistake, but Iruka could see the deliberate strokes and easily pictured Naruto sitting with his tongue out in concentration as he wrote. Iruka read the letter again and again, looking for any signs of distress in the handwriting, but he could find none. He even looked for any sign of any sort of hidden code that may have been there, but could find nothing. Although, there were times that Iruka balked, due to the... language Naruto was using along with some of the things he said about Zoro.

'Dear Iruka-sensei, don't worry about me, I'm doing fine. I wanted to write to let you know that everything's okay. Zoro-nii's taking care of me, although he can be real asshole sometimes. He actually said that we'd have to cut off my finger when a crab bit it, but he was lying about that.

He also makes me do a fking crazy amount of training, but I don't think I could ever do as much as he does. He wants me to be able to do 1,500 pushups by next month, but so far, I can only do around 315 before I have to stop. That includes weights!**

I got a new weapon, it's really cool! Zoro-nii's teaching me all kinds of cool Jutsu too.

I'm training to be an awesome Ninja, so people will have to acknowledge me then!

I miss you Iruka-sensei. When I come back, you, me and my brothers will have to go to Ichiraku's.

-Naruto'

Brothers?

Iruka frowned as he read the letter for the umpteenth time. From what he could tell, it seemed that Zoro was in fact taking care of Naruto. It was clear to him that by Naruto's handwriting, Naruto was himself. But it was concerning and discomfoting, while somehow being assuring at the same time.

Naruto appeared to be happy and safe, yet he was referring to Zoro and another person as his 'brothers', which made Iruka think that was

how Zoro was manipulating Naruto. By being the family that Naruto never had. The thought made his heart ache.

Naruto was promising to return someday, but...under what conditions? There was no mention of revenge, or anger at his treatment. In fact, Naruto wanted to prove to people that he deserved their respect. When did Naruto plan to return?

Gripping the letter, Iruka dropped what he was doing and marched over to tell the Third about the letter. He didn't know what else he could do. But in all honesty, the tenseness was gone from his shoulders, and he wasn't even aware of the small smile on his face. Iruka wasn't as worried as he had been, but he ignored the relieved part of himself and focused on the worry. If only... if only he had been there more for Naruto... no! This wasn't the time to be blaming himself!

Iruka reached the Hokage Tower, and after nodding a silent greeting to the ANBU outside, Iruka went up the stairs, and knocked on the now-repaired office door.

"Come in." Hiruzen's voice sounded from inside.

Iruka entered to find an equally grim-looking Hokage.

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Teuchi and Ayame missed their number one customer. It was far too quiet without him here, happily chatting and demanding as many rounds of ramen as he could afford – of course, Teuchi would always give Naruto a few extra bowls even when Naruto could only afford one or two that day, claiming that they were specials or some other excuse. He was far too skinny, and so Ayame would slip in a few extra slices of pork and vegetables to make sure that Naruto got his protein and other essential nutrients.

A man came in, ordered miso ramen and left within the same hour. From the looks of him, he was likely a traveler. When Ayame went to clear up his dishes, she noticed that he had left behind a scroll. At first, she of course was understandably concerned. But then she noticed the childish scrawl on the scroll, and she recognized the messy handwriting immediately. It was addressed to her and her father.

Ayame called out, "Papa!" and quickly opened the scroll, and read it out loud for both of them.

"Dear Teuchi-san and Ayame-chan, thanks for the ramen! I'm going away for a while, but I promise I'll be back when I'm an awesome Ninja! When I come back, me and my brothers-" Ayame paused there, because of course Naruto didn't have any siblings, but at her father's prompting, she continued. *"-my brothers will eat at Ichiraku's. Gaara has never had ramen. Can you believe that? So when I come back, he'll have to try the best ramen ever. Although he says he likes dango, as long as it's not too sweet. Zoro-nii doesn't care as long as there's booze."*

Zoro-nii is really strong, but he's crazy about training and can be scary sometimes. But he's really cool! Gaara is also really smart, he knows things, but he doesn't know all the games I like playing, so he kinda sucks at them. I'm showing him what I know, but he doesn't always get it because he thinks really weird."

I'll see you soon,

Naruto'."

The father-daughter pair both smiled in relief, as it truly seemed that Naruto was alright. But now, they wondered what they should do. Someone had left it behind for them, and it was clearly Naruto's handwriting.

Teuchi took the letter from his daughter and read it over for himself a few more times. Finally, he said, "Naruto-kun seems happy."

"Papa?"

Teuchi thought about what he wanted to say, and with a small smile, he said, "This Zoro... Naruto genuinely seems happy with him. And he *has* promised to come back, hasn't he? We'll just have to trust that he will. When he does, it'll be our job to feed him."

It wasn't like the letter revealed any sort of information on wherever Naruto was – besides, from the way that Naruto described the two people he was with, there wasn't anything to worry about, and he seemed safe, but most importantly: happy. Of course, they both knew that people were currently hunting for Zoro, for somehow taking the boy out of Konoha. But they had heard the whispers when the Uchiha Police and ANBU were out of sight and earshot about what had happened that night: Zoro had protected Naruto, and had been furious at how Naruto had been treated. In fact, he had broken the drunk man's leg, and then demanded an explanation for why no-one intervened when a kid was being beaten up by an adult.

In Teuchi's opinion, that spoke volumes about Zoro's character. So he would trust that Zoro would take care of Naruto until they returned.

Teuchi took the scroll and carefully rolled it back up, and he went to the backroom of their restaurant where he placed the scroll in his coat pocket. The scroll would soon be hung on the wall of his bedroom, as he counted on the promise of Naruto's eventual return.

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Itachi approached Kakashi's apartment, and noted that it was clear that no-one had been there in a while. A few months' worth of mail was piling up, and Itachi didn't want to risk leaving the scroll behind for prying eyes. Itachi picked up the newspaper that laid at the very bottom of the messy stack, checking the date. It was the day after Zoro had taken Naruto with him.

Where was he? So with a sigh, Itachi gathered Kakashi's mail and newspapers into neat stacks and decided to take all of it with him for now until he could see the man face-to-face, whenever that would be. He wasn't going to risk trying to somehow break into Kakashi's apartment even if it was only to deliver his mail. An eccentric, paranoid man like Kakashi who made a living as a Ninja was a dangerous combination.

He wasn't sure whether or not Kakashi was out on a mission; but it had been due to the older male's advice that they knew what they did about Zoro. It had taken less than a minute in conversing with Zoro to realize that Kakashi had been telling everyone half-truths. Kakashi had purposefully committed treason by not only allowing Naruto to be taken, but he had let an *outsider* like Zoro take him, and had *lied* about it without blinking an eye.

Itachi suppressed a scoff, as he made his way home amongst the darkened streets lit only by the streetlamps. Because the thing was... Itachi understood. He understood why Koshiro would leave, he understood why Kakashi would do what he did; for Itachi and Shisui had helped keep Naruto and Zoro out of Konoha's grasp wherever and whenever they could.

Itachi hated that he understood.

Konoha taught loyalty to its Shinobi, only to turn around and ferociously bite the hands that fed it.

It was not understanding why Koshiro made the decisions that he did.

It was causing a man to commit *seppuku*, being shamed for choosing the lives of his comrades over the mission only for his son to find him dead. It was turning that young boy into a weapon, and not allowing him to be Human when he should have been able to grieve. It was saving Konoha from the Kyuubi, only to attack and accuse the warden for being the monster. It was victimizing an innocent child, and not allowing the closest thing he had to a family member to adopt him. It was turning on one of its most powerful and influential Clans and making them resent the fact. It was either betray Konoha and kill thousands; or spare the thousands and kill his entire Clan.

Oh, how Itachi *understood*.

He would not betray Konoha directly if he could help it, but he would not obey the rules if they contradicted with his personal morals. So he would loophole his way through the rules and misconstrue meanings so that those that deserved it could go on living. He would not let Konoha have its way when innocent lives were at stake.

So he understood what he had to do.

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Hiruzen stared at the letter in his hands, blinking a few times before he finally reread it for the umpteenth time that evening. The more he read it, the more he frowned.

'Dear Gramps,

Things are fine, I promise! Zoro has been taking care of me, although he can be a scary asshole sometimes. But he's really cool! He makes me train like crazy, and so I need to step it up.

I wanna be an awesome Ninja someday, and my name will be heard all around the world, you better believe it! I'm gonna come back to Konoha someday, so don't worry too much. But when I do, I'll be an awesome Ninja and the villagers are totally gonna respect me!

Thanks for looking after me, Gramps. It really means a lot. I'll see you again someday.

-Naruto'

Hiruzen studied every minute detail of the letter, right down to the ink strokes. Naruto hadn't been in any sort of distress while writing it,

so that was a relief. He recognized Zoro's handwriting; which was mixed in with Naruto's childish scrawls. So, Zoro had written the kanji for Naruto, only for the boy to unnecessarily rewrite a few of the words.

But unlike Teuchi and Ayame, (and Iruka somewhat) Hiruzen didn't get any warm, relaxed feelings anywhere in his aching body. His mind continued to be restless; his heart still ached with Naruto's absence; and his gut continued to twist with worry. Because *someone* in Konoha had encountered Zoro and Naruto. Instead of apprehending Zoro and bringing Naruto home, they had delivered him a letter *from* Naruto.

It had simply shown up on his desk sometime during the night. No-one could say who or when it had been delivered. So here he was, trying not to be too concerned.

Naruto intended to return to Konoha someday as 'an awesome Ninja', but under what circumstances? Did he need to be concerned? He wanted the villager's respect, so did that mean that Naruto was going to show up with the intention of demonstrating why they should respect him?

Was he looking into the letter way too much?

Back then...

Naruto had to have been five years old at the time. A few villagers had ganged up on him, and he had gotten a nasty cut on his head as a result. But an ANBU had come to his rescue, and the villagers had gotten very stern slaps on the wrists. As Naruto sat on the chair in front of Hiruzen's desk, holding an icepack to his already healing forehead, he asked Hiruzen questions about his job. Naruto's eyes had gone as wide as dinner plates as Hiruzen explained everything that he did in detail.

"So...does tha' mean people r'spect ya?"

He laughed. *"Well...some would rather I not be Hokage, but most of them respect me."*

The boy made a fist-pumping motion after a few (very rare) brief moments of silence as he thought about what Hiruzen had told him. *"Oi, Gramps! I'm gon' be Hokage someday, ya better believe it! I'll show ya and the other villagers, 'ttebayo! I'm gon' sit in this room!"*

Hiruzen's thoughts then drifted to that fateful night on October 10th

just a few months prior and the conversation he had had with Zoro, along with a few of the things Zoro had said.

"He is to be Shinobi of Konoha, if that is what you are asking, Roronoa-san." Danzo said.

"Yeah, sure." Zoro snorted derisively. "If you expect a kid like him to become a Ninja of this village, then don't you think you'd want to keep him on your side?"

"I saw him getting kicked out of a store; that dumbass clerk thought that Naruto was going to steal something, even though the kid had money. You people are doing a real bang-up job of making Naruto want to be a Ninja of Konoha. I wouldn't be surprised nor would I blame him if he ended up being one of those Ninja with a scratch through his headband."

Did Zoro intend to turn Naruto against Konoha? Show the boy the life that he deserved? It was one of Hiruzen's many regrets.

But Hiruzen sat there and *really* thought about Zoro's taking Naruto. Zoro of all people, who made children cry simply by glaring in their direction; had come along, rescued a child merely because it was the right thing to do, and even expressed mild interest in taking Naruto in when it was clear no-one was there to take care of the boy. But because of Zoro's outsider status, even *if* he had been a citizen of Fire Country, he was not a resident of Konoha – because of that minor detail, the Council didn't want Naruto to be taken in by someone like that. Even if Zoro had actually dropped everything that he was doing and legally became a Konoha resident, it would still have been unlikely that he could have kept Naruto.

Minato's legacy had the world stacked against him from the day he was born. He was to be viewed as a hero by the people, but those people saw only the monster the hero had rescued them from. Zoro had paid attention where he had been negligent; and now, they were paying for it.

Hiruzen slowly swiveled in his chair to look out at the Hokage monument; specifically at Minato.

"I've failed your son in more ways than one, Minato..." Hiruzen muttered. "I'm sorry... I truly am."

"...What's going to happen to Naruto? Does he have anyone to care for him?"

Naruto had stated in his letter that Zoro was taking care of him. He was going to be just fine, wasn't he? Hiruzen wanted to – *had* to believe that.

But there was also the matter of Zoro being descended from a Clan that had supposedly went extinct almost 200 years ago. What was Zoro's plan? Hiruzen sighed, as he was now asking himself the same questions he had the moment he heard about Zoro's Kekkei Genkai from Jiraiya.

"I'm getting too old for this..."

Hiruzen read the letter a few more times before he deemed that it was pointless to read any more than he already had. So he tucked the letter away in his coat to ensure that no-one else could read it. Then, lighting his pipe, Hiruzen busied himself with various forms and papers that had piled on his desk so that he wouldn't have to dwell on wherever Naruto and Zoro were and what they were doing.

There was a knock on his door.

"Come in."

Iruka entered the room with a slight bow. "Hokage-sama...I thought that you should see something."

Iruka held up a scroll that looked very similar to the one that Hiruzen had received.

Hiruzen sighed internally. He definitely was getting too old for this.

-80808-

Somewhere, in a village in Kiri...

Gaara decided that he did not like the cold or the wet that was Kiri. Since it was winter, Kiri was both cold and wet, instead of being extremely humid and wet. For the people of Kiri, there wasn't really an in-between, and none of them really cared at this point. This was their harsh reality.

Fortunately, Zoro, Gaara, and Naruto all had winter clothing. Gaara was wrapped up a bit more than what was necessary, with two coats and a scarf that clearly marked him as a foreigner. Mentally, Gaara listed all the things he hated about the cold, the wet, the mud, and why the mud was such a miserable thing to exist. His feet were caked

with dried mud that Gaara swore up and down also smelled like the bathrooms in the restaurant they were currently in.

Zoro was completely unsympathetic and simply told Gaara that they could wash off his shoes and feet later. So Gaara silently stewed in his misery.

At that moment, the trio was sitting at the bar of an upstairs restaurant in some seedy village. Zoro sat at the bar nursing a horribly watered-down and overpriced bottle of alcohol.

Naruto and Gaara sat to the left of Zoro on accompanying barstools, looking at the meager selection on the menu.

"What?!" Naruto shouted in a near whine. "You don't have *ramen*?!"

"That's a luxury that isn't offered here, kid," the unsympathetic bartender replied with a shrug and wave of a hand that was missing two fingers.

This was the worst! Zoro simply ignored Naruto's dramatics, but he could feel a slight twinge of annoyance.

"Just pick something else, brat. Food is food, no matter how good or bad it tastes." Zoro said in between sips of the abomination that dared to call itself "booze". Ah...the booze that had come from the gourd that was now in Gaara's possession had been so good while it lasted.

Gaara just silently glowered at anyone and everyone in his cold and wet misery. He glared at a tank top-wearing man who was sitting at one of the tables with a girl who was a few years older than he was. Other people were wearing short sleeves (and even shorts) and Gaara wondered how any of them could stand it. Zoro-nii simply put on a light gray coat and simply kept it open, while Naruto simply wore a somewhat thick dark blue jacket. Gaara was annoyed at them for not suffering in the cold like he was.

"Sand-brat, quit moping and get something to eat." Zoro sighed, not really wanting to eat here. But it was cheap, and they needed to eat whatever was available where and when they could. The real reason Zoro had decided to get food at this shithole was one: he could have some booze (as awful as it tasted) and two: he could ask questions about the *Kiri no Yuurei*, and not really raise any suspicions, because they were "stories" after all.

Both the boys got some kind of watered-down broth/gruel

combination that looked like something someone had scraped from the bottom of a pig trough – and that was being generous in its description. They sucked it up and ate, although Naruto thought that the crappy food back at the Konoha orphanage was a luxury compared to this. Gaara felt as if this was some sort of divine retribution for all the people he had unwittingly slaughtered in his short life.

"Hey, old man..." Zoro quietly called out to the bartender. When the man's focus was on him, he asked, "Can you tell me anything about the *Kiri no Yuurei*? I've been fascinated by 'em for years now. Everyone has a different story."

The bartender snorted. "Ev'ryone'n their mothers has some sorta story 'bout *those* people. Heh. We'd prob'ly be 'ere for a week straight iffin I told ya ev'ry story I heard in this place."

Zoro nodded, and before he could ask something else, the bartender's face suddenly fell into an expression that was an odd mix of annoyance and fear. Mostly fear. The chatter in the room also died out within minutes of who or what had gotten the bartender's ire.

Zoro subtly turned so that he could look over his shoulder, and he narrowed his eyes at the person who had entered.

The man was short, only coming up to Zoro's waist had he been standing. His cat-like face was set into an overconfident smirk; likely because of the three hired men accompanying him. This man plainly wasn't a fighter. Zoro also found the man's physical appearance odd. This man was the first person he had seen in the Elemental Nations whose appearance was like that of some of the people back home. While he was Human, his features were almost cat-like; but only in the face. The overconfident aloofness that leaked off of the man in waves set Zoro on edge. These were the kind of people he hated the most.

The man smirked. "Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Gato. Excuse the interruption, I wouldn't normally enter such a... *fine* establishment such as this one, but I feel that it's worth it. I'm looking for men and I'm willing to pay. Also..." Gato's eyes fell on the tank top-wearing man in the corner. "Word on the street is that one Momochi Zabuza was seen frequenting this area. You *are* him, correct?"

"So what if I am?" Zabuza growled back from under his facial bandages. His fingers slowly wrapped around an oversized blade he had initially managed to keep out of sight (which was an admirable

feat, considering the size of the blade) and now he brought it into full view. He tilted his head in a way that caused the dim lighting to reflect off of his scratched-through hitai-ate. The girl glared at Gato, unmistakably ready to fight if need be.

"I need men." Gato replied with a casual shrug, as if he weren't talking to a man who looked ready to take his head off with a blade over half of his diminutive size. "And..." Gato turned towards Zoro with a smirk.

"Those are fine swords you have there... you look like you know how to use them." His smirk widened. "Would you like to work for me? I'd be willing to pay a decent price."

Zoro took one look at Gato and muttered, "F**k off. I'm not interested."

Both boys looked from Gato to Zoro, wondering if they would have to fight, and subtly prepared themselves if that was the case.

Gato frowned as if he had smelled something particularly vile, and with a snap of his fingers, one of his men shot wires with small weights towards Zoro before he had a chance to move. The wires wrapped around his swords and yanked them away from Zoro. When his swords were pulled away, one of the sheaths flipped up and smashed into Zoro's alcohol bottle, spilling its contents and glass shards everywhere.

"Zoro-nii!" Naruto called out before baring his teeth at the attacker. "You bastard!"

The wire-Ninja held onto Zoro's swords with a too-pleased with himself smirk, while Gato snapped his fingers and pointed to Naruto and Gaara. Another of his men stepped forward, obeying like a dog. He pulled out a pair of tanto, and held them towards the two boys. Zoro was glaring daggers at this point, glancing from the tanto-idiot and Gato.

Confident that Zoro didn't have any other weapons on him as they weren't visible – and even *if* Zoro did have another weapon, Gato had one more man with him that was a good two feet taller and much more muscular than the lanky teen.

"I don't like being told no." Gato said, tapping his cane on the floor as a sense of finality. "You can get your swords back and those kids won't get hurt." Shaking his head, Gato added, "Tsk, and here I was going to pay you a fine price – but it's a few hundred less than what I would

have originally paid."

"You broke my bottle..." Zoro growled, slowly turning in his seat to face Gato. A few people wondered why Zoro was angry about such a thing in a situation like this one. But none would deny the obvious anger seeping from his words.

"And your shitty bastard for hire put his dirty hands all over my swords." He glared specifically at Gato, who openly flinched. But... what did he have to worry about? He had three (possibly four, if he included Zabuza) men against a teenager and two kids under ten. *He* had the advantage! What could this bratty upstart even do?

The three men each felt nervous, but did a much better job of hiding it than their boss. But there was no doubt that Zoro was *pissed*.

Zoro eyed Naruto who was between him and Gaara, and then Gaara. "Gaara...shield *now*!"

"What the-!" the double-tanto-Ninja suddenly found his hands encased in a wall of sand that now surrounded the boys in a dome. There was a poof of smoke, and Zoro stood with one of his oversized weights that was specifically meant for swinging. The eyes of everyone who saw the barbell and the ease with which Zoro lifted it widened and their jaws just about hit the floor.

Zoro swung the weight downwards, which in hindsight wasn't a very good idea – seeing how they were on the second floor and all.

The larger Shinobi guarding Gato thought that if the lanky teen could lift the large weights, then so could he. After all, this had to be a ploy or an extremely well-done Genjutsu. The one who held onto the swords used his wires to pull himself and Gato out of the way upwards towards the rafters, leaving his partners to deal with Zoro and the kids. His large partner didn't even have a chance to scream as the weight crushed him with its momentum, cracking and shattering the floor beneath them.

Gaara shoved the man who was trapped in his sand into the wall, effectively knocking the wind out of him. The man gasped and wheezed for air as black spots clouded his vision. The back of his head was throbbing, and the rest of his body was protesting against the slightest of movements that he could barely even manage. He welcomed the darkness that enveloped him.

Meanwhile, Gaara smiled at the sight of a broken and bloody man

with joy and pride. He had managed to not kill the man! Raising his arms in triumph with a very Naruto-esque flare, he shouted, "I did it!"

Naruto gave Gaara a flashy grin and a thumbs' up before the two turned serious and their eyes fell upon a certain sword-thief who shivered when he felt their gazes on him. The two boys were in agreement that they were not going to sit out of any fights that may come their way. They both made their way upwards, intent on retrieving Zoro's swords back.

The Shinobi quickly realized that *he* was the target and not Gato, so as his client, it was his job to keep the fights away from the mob boss. So he ended up creating a clone to deal with the two boys while he stayed to protect his client. But he wasn't prepared for his clone to meet a very unfortunate and crushing fate by sand.

The wayward Shinobi spared a glance down at his fallen comrade that had been smacked into the wall. He wasn't sure if the man was still alive or not, but considering that he hadn't been fully enveloped and crushed into a pulp by this kid's sand, chances were he was *possibly* still alive.

So now, he had to take these boys seriously. They both were clearly determined to get back this Roronoa guy's swords. And he didn't have time to really sit and consider the situation, as he had a kusarigama and sand shooting at him from various directions.

Naruto and Gaara made a pretty good team; Gaara could both attack and automatically defend, while Naruto had unpredictable movements thanks to being able to hide behind Gaara's sand and wielding his kusarigama in a haphazard way at completely random times. Their technique kept the swords-thief on the defensive and evasive.

There were people yelling and screaming, but Zoro had made sure his makeshift weapon only targeted one specific person, and now, he turned his attention on Gato and the Ninja who had his swords.

Resealing his weights, Zoro then focused, and in less than a second he was next to the man who had stolen his swords.

"What the hell?!"

The man drew a kunai to defend himself, when a kusarigama shot towards him from below, and a large pillar of sand shot up from behind, successfully cornering him. Dammit! He had to find a way out of this!

Zoro used the welcome distraction to grab his swords. He was sorely tempted to hug the most precious of his swords to his chest and check it for any damages, but he would save that for later. Thanks to Naruto and Gaara, Gato was separated from his only remaining bodyguard.

The bodyguard cursed when he lost the swords jumping away from Zoro as he evaded the sand/kusarigama onslaught, and the only reason he gained the distance he did was because the boys' attacks slowed down. Probably because Zoro now had his swords.

But now, he realized the distance between himself and Gato, and he saw that Zoro was now right next to the diminutive man. The Shinobi didn't have time to be distracted, as Gaara was after him again, because the redhead figured that the man would try to prevent Zoro from dealing with Gato and Naruto was right behind.

Currently, Gato desperately searched for Zabuzza, hoping the man would come to his rescue. But they hadn't come to any sort of definite agreement, so the chances of that happening was unlikely. Gato could have sworn he was looking at a demon in that moment as Zoro towered over him.

"And worst of all..." there was the ring of metal as Zoro drew his sword. "You dared to threaten those brats."

"Wait!" Gato held up a hand, but Zoro only swung his sword towards him in response.

Gato's head and arm fell to the broken floor below them.

"I surrender!"

The wire-wielding Shinobi shouted above the noise. He had been avoiding the two crazy kids by jumping around the rafters for the past few minutes, and when he realized that Gato was dead, he hoped he could have an out.

"I surrender." he said again. He was feeling more exhausted than he realized. "Gato's dead, so there's no reason for us to fight."

The boys backed off now, and waited to see what Zoro would do next. Zoro was next to him within seconds and punched the man in the jaw. The man fell backwards, and the only reason he didn't fall to the floor was because he quickly stuck himself to one of the beams with chakra.

"What the hell was that for?!"

"You broke my beer bottle."

"Why are you still angry about that?!"

Zoro only scoffed in response and walked away.

The Shinobi figured that he should be thankful that Zoro hadn't killed him like his other comrade, and he didn't have anything broken like the guy over by the wall. Deciding that he should take care of his comrade, the man quickly, but not really gently, picked up his fallen partner off of the floor and tossed him over his shoulder as if he were a sack of potatoes. Then, they were gone in a poof of smoke.

Zoro made his way back to Gato, with Naruto and Gaara following him closely.

"What should we do with him?" Naruto asked.

"I could take care of the body with my sand." Gaara offered.

"Just leave 'im." Zoro said, pilfering Gato's pockets. The man had a few decent-sized wads of ryo in his pockets, and the only reason he had been confident enough to carry that much was thanks to his bodyguards.

Zoro and the two boys returned to the floor below them, ignoring the shocked and even fearful stares people were giving them. Zoro tossed a wad of ryo onto the counter muttering, "Sorry for the trouble."

Then he motioned to Naruto and Gaara. "Let's get going."

As they left the village behind, Gaara looked up at Zoro. "Zoro-nii... what's the *Kiri no Yuurei*?"

Zoro shrugged indifferently. "It's one of the names for the Clan I'm from."

He glanced around at the thick mist. Had it been this thick before? He hadn't really noticed. Weird. Whatever. He simply trudged on ahead without a second thought.

"Wow...you're from a Clan, 'ttebayo!" Naruto said in awe. "What are they called? What do you know about them?"

The odd mist finally thinned out at a point the path forked. While Zoro was wondering which direction they should head, a voice interrupted his thoughts.

"So you *are* from that accursed Clan," the voice said, clearly amused. Zabuza stepped out of the now dissipating mist, showing that it was a Jutsu. "No use denying it. The fact that you didn't even get lost in the mist while on the road is proof enough."

"What do you want?" Zoro asked, stepping forward as he simultaneously pulled the boys behind him. He curiously eyed an odd-looking girl who stood a few feet away and behind Zabuza. The girl was clearly ready to move if Zoro was a threat.

Zabuza smiled from behind his bandaged face.

"I want to make a proposition."

0-0-0

Jiraiya wasn't happy. He had left Konoha earlier that week when he was contacted numerous time over the span of the next few days, by various messengers sent by his network claiming that they had seen some variation of Zoro and Naruto (being accompanied by others) in various parts of the Elemental Nations. The man's frown deepened the more he read the reports. Someone was f**king with him. That's what this was.

According to his sources, people spotted Zoro lingering in various areas of the Elemental Nations... all at the same time. But it was also annoyingly inconsistent.

One person had seen Zoro with *two* black-haired older males, a little girl with red hair, and a young boy with blond hair. According to another, it was *possibly* Zoro was with a young, blond-haired woman. One was positive she had seen Zoro with two other black-haired males and a blond boy. Another was saying that his sources had seen Zoro with a black-haired male and a red-haired girl.

In all honestly and very irritatingly, a seed of doubt took root, because Jiraiya started to think that *maybe* he had it all wrong; and Zoro *wasn't* headed towards Kiri, because two of his sources lived further north, somewhere between Fire Country and Yu.

Because of the inconsistencies and the absolute confidence those located within his network had of seeing Zoro and Naruto (and the boy's likeness) Jiraiya was actually wondering if they somehow had been wrong about Zoro all along. After all, there was doubt of Zoro even being *from* Kiri in the first place. But Kiri was all Jiraiya had, and the evidence suggested otherwise. So begrudgingly, he decided to

continue on to Kiri, hoping that he wasn't wrong in doing so.

This situation got Jiraiya to start wondering who was helping Zoro. Was Zoro actually part of some larger organization, and that's who all those people were? That was the only explanation Jiraiya could think of.

Over the course of the following week as Jiraiya subtly made his way through Kiri, the few people that were located within his network were now telling him that Zoro was traveling with none other than the insurgent known as Momochi Zabuza.

Things had just gone from bad to worse...

Chapter End Notes

How's the fluff? Zoro's relationship with Naruto and Gaara is still growing, but Zoro is now coming to fully accepting his brotherly role with Gaara and Naruto. Sort of at a snail's pace, but still. Plus, he now has a vague idea of how much the boys actually look up to him. Dammit, now he has to adult.

Go, big-bro!Zoro! You can do it! *cheers*

And Zabuza and Haku are here! What? Zabuza and Haku are two of my favorite characters in the series, and I do so love it when a fic that uses them keeps them alive.

Because I don't think I can properly fit this in somewhere... Juzo (clearly) never received Kubikiribocho. At some point between Juzo dying and this point in time, Zabuza received the sword. More to come from this awesome pair later.

ALSO: The Kūhaku... So much more is going to come from them. I have all kinds of plans! *maniacal laughter ensues*

空白(Kūhaku) can mean blank, blank space, null, and space.

Sometimes, You Just Gotta Ask Yourself the BIG Question: Is the Headache Even Worth It?

Chapter Summary

When Itachi and Shisui return to Konoha without Naruto, Fugaku expresses his displeasure. Zabuza recognizes Zoro for what he is, and tries to recruit him, but Zoro refuses. They come to an agreement to travel together because of similar goals, although Zoro initially tries to discourage it. Zoro unwittingly interferes just a bit more with the people around him when he gets lost. Zabuza doesn't really like children, and someone should really tell Zoro to stop collecting them. Events make Zabuza question his life's choices.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for the kudos! I should warn you that I somehow accidentally got my author's notes mixed up a bit between chapters 6-7 and quickly fixed it ... -_- if there's any confusion, I do apologize... go exhausted me.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Two days and half ago, before Itachi and Shisui's return to Konoha...

It had been an interesting couple of days for the Uchiha cousins. They had numerous and interesting discussions with Zoro; involving his hometown and the fact that his sensei, the man who had raised him was Koshiro – a man that all of Konoha and the majority of the Elemental Nations had believed to be dead or extremely skilled at hiding after he had defected from Konoha roughly twenty years before.

It explained his oddities. In all honestly, it had been entirely unbelievable. If anyone else had told them, they would have thought it was all a joke. But coming from someone like Zoro... well, it explained *everything*. Why he looked and spoke the way he did, and why he had shown up seemingly out of nowhere.

"Kakashi knows." Zoro had said. *"He was the first one I told."*

Zoro told them many interesting stories, removing all doubt from their minds. But it brought about a rather curious position of both

helplessness and of convenience. Helplessness in that there wasn't really anything to be done – not without the likes of Zoro there to guide someone who was extremely knowledgeable in the likes of Fuuinjutsu, such as Jiraiya.

But...the Council in Konoha would very likely brand Zoro a liar and demand his execution for taking Naruto; and Kakashi's self-sacrificing decision would have been for nothing. They would force Naruto to return; ripping him away from Zoro, and as a result the boy would more than likely resent the village for forcing his return, along with the Council's likely decision to keep him under lock and key. Itachi would be back to square one, having to carry out the orders that would leave his little brother alone and hating him.

And what about Gaara? It was more than evident that Naruto and Zoro were the boy's world. Given how he acted towards the Konoha-Nin when his world was threatened, especially when he wasn't willing to use his sand on the people around him... There would probably be a good number of unfortunate souls that would get a first-hand introduction to Ichibi.

The convenience of their situation was a particularly advantageous one. Because when Zoro would leave Kiri, there was no way to follow him. Naruto would be kept out of Fugaku's clutches, and Konoha and his Clan would be safe.

Now, the two Uchiha were on their way back to Konoha, but not before a few brief, highly necessary detours.

It was Naruto who asked for a few empty scrolls (that the Uchiha had on hand) so that he could write letters to the people back home, since he hadn't had the chance to say goodbye properly.

"Don't worry, Dattebayo!" he promised with a grin. "I won't tell anyone where we're goin'!"

Naruto had been very specific in who his letters would be for: the Old Man, Iruka, Teuchi and Ayame, and Kakashi. Zoro had asked if he could add something in the letter to Kakashi, and Naruto didn't mind sharing.

The cousins took the long and intricate way back home; taking nearly a week to do so. They knew that Jiraiya would probably be out looking for Zoro and Naruto right now. Since they didn't know all of who was involved in his information network, they could only do so much. So through the use of hinged clones and Genjutsu, Zoro, along

with a few others were traveling around the Elemental Nations in various directions. So, they made absolutely sure that Zoro and Naruto were clearly seen by people in areas not at all near Kiri; and that word would one way or another get back to a man like Jiraiya.

There was only a chance that it would only buy them a few days' time, but it was out of their hands now.

OoOoO

So the Uchiha cousins returned back to Konoha bearing the bad news that they had been fruitless in their attempts to find Zoro and Naruto.

As they were passing through the gate to Konoha, they happened to overhear the guards at the talking about a pair of Ninja who almost had Zoro within their grasp, but he simply vanished. But not before totally working over the guy – who's arm and leg had been seriously injured. "He also stole Gabureiru's kusarigama! Right from underneath her! I mean, who *does* that?!"

Shisui smiled, but only slightly, enjoying the moment of humor while it lasted. But he quickly put on his impassive mask (because respectable Uchiha *do not* show emotion) and took a deep breath in preparation for what was to come.

Within one of the larger rooms of the Uchiha Estate, they all sat on cushions around a wooden table in yet another Clan meeting, claiming that Zoro had simply "vanished" and that they could find no trace of him.

To say that Uchiha Fugaku was angry would have been a very mild understatement. While the other Clan members muttered under their breath in annoyance to the news, Fugaku's quiet voice was somehow loud enough to cut through the loudly whispered conversations about twenty other Uchiha were having.

"Everyone except Itachi and Shisui, leave. *Now.*"

The Uchiha Clan members immediately fell silent and eyed the aforementioned boys with either pity at facing Fugaku's wrath, or looks of contempt for their failure and deserved punishment. They shuffled out, and closed the sliding door behind them. When Fugaku was quiet and still, that meant he was absolutely furious. Both the cousins stared at the table in front of them; neither daring to move. They only waited in tense silence for Fugaku to make the first move. He suddenly grabbed the heavy oak table and flung it across the room

into the wall; where it left impressive cracks and holes, breaking numerous cups and dishes, and strewn bits of food to the floor. The table also knocked a few decorative wall scrolls to the floor, tearing them in the process.

Shisui ended up having to dip to the side only somewhat, to keep himself from getting clocked on the side of his head by a table leg. Fugaku sent him a red-eyed glare that looked as if to question why he would even so much as *dare* to move out of the pathway of the thrown furniture.

Itachi stayed still with practiced ease from witnessing and experiencing firsthand his father's temper, and eyed the broken porcelain with mismatched patterns scattered across the floor, and thoughts of his mother laughing with outside friends about having eclectic taste as she always had mismatched tea sets ever since he could remember. People thought that she collected tea sets, and simply used a piece from each of her sets; so they were always giving them to her as gifts. Rather, she used the pieces from the new ones to replace what her husband always seemed inclined to break.

"I can't even express the disappointment I have in both of you – especially you, Itachi," Fugaku's eyes started to bleed as his temper flared, and the tomoe in his eyes became black circles instead of their traditional tear-drop shape. More black dots slowly began forming in Fugaku's pupils and the sclera portion of his eyes like little pinpricks.

"Father-" Itachi started, but he was cut off by Fugaku.

"Do *not* speak while I am *talking*. You are my son, *how* could you fail at *this*?" The thought was incomprehensible to him. Fugaku did not yell; but his voice was loud all the same. "This was a *simple* task! That Roronoa brat is just a mediocre swordsman from some no-name town! You have bested adults twice your age, and this nameless brat is hardly a few years older than you! Shisui's failure is more understood than yours! Skilled as he is, *he's* from a branch family, while *you* are from the Head Clan!" Fugaku's eyes were bleeding far more profusely now; the blood was starting to look more black than red, and was becoming increasingly thick; like watered down pudding. Turning on Shisui now, Fugaku continued his tirade, his now increasing in volume. "*We* are *not* like those foolish Hyuuga who limit their own bloodline, but rather, we *allow* the Branch Clan freedoms to demonstrate *our* strength. You have *failed* this family, *both* of you!"

He seemed to look for something else to throw, but couldn't find it.

Itachi wondered if Fugaku was going to strike either one of them, and honestly, he wouldn't be surprised if his father was contemplating it. He had done it before many times.

"How could you be so utterly incompetent?!" Fugaku abruptly flinched, the pain in his eyes feeling as if they were being pulled out of the back of his skull. Fugaku would have demanded some sort of explanation, but he didn't even want to hear it right now. Taking a deep, gasping breath, he added, *"Hopefully your brother will not be as much of a disappointment as you are."*

Itachi winced (only marginally, thankfully) and fortunately Fugaku missed it because his Sharingan's vision was completely skewed when it was acting up like this. Itachi didn't even want to imagine what Fugaku would put Sasuke through in order to ensure that he wasn't a "failure" like his older brother, who was born naturally talented.

Thoughts of standing in the rain as his hands and feet bled as he struck a wooden post with Fugaku standing over him, observing coldly crossed his mind.

"Again, Itachi. We are not going to let your talent go to waste."

Except now...that drenched figure was Sasuke, and Sasuke was not like him. Itachi's eyes narrowed. Sasuke was only eight years old, and he deserved to be child for a bit longer. The teen did not want to imagine what a disappointed Fugaku would be willing to put his all-too-innocent second son through.

Fugaku took in another shaking, pain-filled breath, trying to get his temper under control. This only happened when he let his emotions get the better of him.

"The only thing we can count on now is Jiraiya finding the Jinchuuriki. You had better hope he does. Now, get out of my sight."

Neither of the cousins were sure what Fugaku would do if Jiraiya returned empty-handed. Fugaku's punishment could range from ordering them to do some sort of rigorous S-Class mission far away from the village for a few months or years, or maybe even outright disowning them.

Itachi and Shisui left Fugaku behind, only breathing a sigh of relief once they were well out of sight and earshot. They had letters to deliver, best get that taken care of.

"So you are from that accursed Clan," the voice said, clearly amused. Zabuza stepped out of the now dissipating mist, showing that it was a Jutsu. "No use denying it. The fact that you didn't even get lost in the mist is proof enough."

"What do you want?" Zoro asked, stepping forward as he simultaneously pulled the boys behind him. He curiously eyed an odd-looking girl who stood a few feet away and behind Zabuza. The girl was clearly ready to move if Zoro was a threat.

Zabuza smiled from behind his bandaged face.

"I want to make a proposition."

Sometime earlier...

At that moment, Momochi Zabuza and Haku were sitting in a tavern in some dingy village that had seen better days. The rebellion against the Third Mizukage had been a bust, leaving the defeated rebels to nurse their wounds, and it had been about a week-and-a-half since Zabuza was declared a "Rogue-Nin".

How long would it take for them to get back on their feet? Zabuza wasn't sure. Since he had rescued Haku from the streets almost five years ago, the boy had been attached to him at the hip and had insisted on joining Zabuza in his exile.

Zabuza wouldn't deny that the boy certainly had his uses; especially since the fact he had a rare Gekkei Genkai and medical knowledge. Anyone outside of Zabuza's limited circle of friends was often under the distinct impression that he saw Haku as nothing more than a tool; something to be thrown away once its usefulness was gone. Everyone knew it was best to act as detached as possible with your comrades – that way, no one would think their death could be used against you.

The truth of it was, Haku was like the family Zabuza once had. They had an odd, pseudo-older brother/younger brother relationship, where with how Haku acted towards Zabuza, the boy might as well be the older sibling.

While it was nice to have someone-*anyone's* companionship that did not consist of someone trying to kill him, a part of Zabuza didn't like

having Haku there – he thought that the kid would've been better off if he had stayed with the revolutionaries. Then he would be safe to fight another day, and wouldn't have a target on his back simply due to association with Zabuza. But no, the kid was like a rabid wolf disguised as a puppy.

Haku had simply shut Zabuza down with an icy glare when the man had tried to tell the young teen to stay behind with the others.

"Please forgive me for being insolent, but I'm coming with you, Zabuza-sama. You're still injured, and need time to recover. What if someone attacks you as you are now? You need someone to watch your back. So stop arguing."

And that was that, and here they were.

Zabuza was honestly still a bit sore at his loss to the third Mizukage, resulting in his having to be declared a rogue-Nin. But he had not only managed to escape (even if it had been by the skin of his teeth) he had managed to at least gain *some* leverage against the corrupt Kage. They would have to wait a few more years to try again; until then they could spend that time training, preparing, and recruiting.

Of course, that also gave the Third Mizukage equal time to prepare, and this time, he would know they were coming. But recruiting was difficult; especially in a country like Kiri. Plus, people generally didn't want anything to do with rogue or missing-Nin unless they were doing something illegal that earned them substantial profit. Their job had been made all the more difficult, as no-one wanted to take a chance with the losing side. Their loss was used as all the more reason not to fight back.

He stopped counting all the times he heard some variation of, 'You already lost; so why even try again when you're going to lose anyway?'

He ignored the few people who recognized him (having a huge sword'll do that) and settled in at some tavern to eat. He noticed a trio of oddly-dressed people; one of which was a rogue Kiri-Nin he didn't recognize (which was odd...did the kid have on a henge or was he (or even she) in disguise?) and two children. One of the children had on two jackets and a scarf, clearly miserable in the winter weather. Zabuza could feel the kid's glare, but it wasn't murderous. He carefully watched the boy's gaze glide over the other patrons, for what reason, Zabuza couldn't be sure. The three settled in at the bar, and he could

hear one of the boys complaining about the food. Heh. The kid was wasting his breath. Sometime later, a hush came over the crowd.

A short man entered the restaurant with three bodyguards accompanying him.

"Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Gato. Excuse the interruption, I wouldn't normally enter such a... *fine* establishment such as this one, but I feel that it's worth it. I'm looking for men and I'm willing to pay. Also..."

Zabuza narrowed his eyes. He had heard about this man from Mei. It was thanks in part to Gato that recruiting people to their cause was so difficult. Hardly anyone wanted to fight a war for free; plus, it was easier to just go with a man like Gato. Gato also had numerous connections with other crime lords throughout the Elemental Countries, but he was by far the most influential.

Zabuza felt Gato's eyes fall on him. Just f***king wonderful.

"Word on the street is that one Momochi Zabuza was seen frequenting this area. You *are* him, correct?"

"So what if I am?" Zabuza growled back. His fingers slowly wrapped around an oversized blade he had initially kept out of sight and now he brought it into full view. He tilted his head in a way that caused the dim lighting to reflect off of his scratched-through hitai-ate. Haku glared at Gato, ready to fight if need be.

"I need men." Gato replied with a casual shrug, as if he weren't talking to a man who looked ready to take his head off. That pissed Zabuza off. The rat-bastard's overconfidence disgusted him.

Zabuza began formulating a plan. What if he could work for Gato? That way, he could acquire money for the Fourth Mizukage's uprising. It would take a while to be sure, but they *did* have to wait a few years anyway to nurse their wounds, get stronger, and gather recruits and supplies. So Zabuza decided that he would work for Gato for a certain amount of time, and then kill him. It would solve numerous problems in more ways than one.

Meanwhile, while Zabuza was contemplating what he should do, Gato had turned his attention to the other rogue-Nin sitting at the bar. The Kiri-Nin only caught the last half of whatever Gato was saying to the kid.

"Would you like to work for me? I'd be willing to pay a decent price."

The teen looked thoroughly unimpressed as he took one look at Gato and muttered, "F**k off. I'm not interested."

Both boys looked from Gato to the rogue-Nin, and Zabuza noticed how they automatically prepared themselves for a possible fight. This was bound to be interesting...

Gato frowned as if he had smelled something vile, and with a snap of his fingers, one of his men shot wires with small weights towards the rogue-Nin so swiftly, that Zabuza was only able to track the wires' movement thanks to the dull light barely reflecting off them.

The wires wrapped around the guy's swords and ripped them away from him. When his swords were pulled away, one of the sheaths flipped up and shattered his alcohol bottle, spilling its contents everywhere. Zabuza glared at the wire-wielding Shinobi with disdain. To take another man's sword was completely dishonorable and a deplorable action.

"Zoro-nii!" The blond boy shouted. "You bastard!"

Zabuza halted at that remark. Did that kid just say *Zoro*? As in *Roronoa Zoro* the Bounty Hunter? He had heard stories that Zoro wielded three swords; the rumors had to be true given that *this* guy *had* three swords, and that he was extremely skilled. And to think, Zoro was a *Kiri-Nin*! But then, Zabuza stopped to think... *how* could that be possible? The timing didn't add up, and he had been aware of all the students who had graduated after his "graduation". Not recognizing him now made *some* sense. Pushing the question into the back of his mind, Zabuza decided to silently observe what the swordsman would do without his swords.

The wire-Ninja held onto Zoro's swords with a too-pleased with himself smirk, while Gato snapped his fingers and pointed to the two boys. Another of his men stepped forward, obeying like a dog. He pulled out a pair of tanto, and held them towards the two boys. Zoro was glaring daggers at this point, glancing from the tanto-idiot and Gato.

"I don't like being told 'no'." Gato said, tapping his cane on the floor as a sense of finality. "You can get your swords back and those kids won't get hurt." Shaking his head, Gato added, "Tsk, and here I was going to pay you a fine price – but it's a few hundred less than what I would have originally paid."

"You broke my bottle..." Zoro growled, slowly turning in his seat to face Gato. Zabuza frowned as he wondered why Zoro was prioritizing such a thing like a broken bottle of cheap alcohol at a time like this.

"And your shitty bastard for hire put his dirty hands all over my swords." Zoro glared specifically at Gato, who openly flinched.

Unfortunately for Gato, Zabuza was completely unaware that the tiny man was silently including him in his panic to not die by a kid angry about having his drink ruined prematurely. Instead, Zabuza was more interested in how this situation played out. It was... both amusing and interesting.

Obviously, the three men each felt nervous, but did a much better job of hiding it than their boss. Zabuza could've sworn he could see the waves of anger wafting off of Zoro.

Just then, Zoro called out, "Gaara...shield *now!*"

"What the-!" the double-tanto-Nin suddenly found his hands encased in a wall of sand that now surrounded the boys. There was a poof of smoke, and Zoro stood with one the largest barbells that Zabuza had ever seen, and he easily held it over his head, preparing for a downward strike.

"What the hell..." the rogue-Nin muttered under his breath.

Haku had witnessed feats of strength before – Zabuza-sama could easily wield his oversized sword with one arm through brute strength alone. But this...this was something else!

"Is that...is that *normal?*" Haku whispered in awe.

"Like hell it is."

Zabuza's eyes slowly traced down to the floor when it occurred to him that they were *upstairs*. And the floor was about to be practically none-existent. "Oh, shit."

Zabuza couldn't decide in that moment whether or not Zoro was ingenious or an idiot. As Zoro swung the weight downwards, Zabuza held tight to his sword as he and Haku jumped out of the way, towards the rafters above them. Then, he made sure to keep out of sight so he could simply observe. Things were *definitely* getting interesting.

The larger Shinobi stood no chance at what had to be a few thousand pounds of weight fell on top of him. The one who had grabbed Zoro's sword swiftly pulled himself and Gato out of the way, narrowly dodging the strike. As predicted, the floor beneath them shattered and fell, leaving a huge gaping hole in the middle of the floor. People were running to the sides, standing on and grabbing whatever they could to keep from falling the mere six or seven (eight, if you were being generous) feet below.

The bartender yelled and cursed at Zoro, but went ignored.

The man who was trapped in Gaara's sand was suddenly shoved to the side by the sand barrier and was slammed against the wall, effectively knocking the wind out of him. The man fell to the floor in a daze, very likely having more than one thing broken given how his expression looked incredibly pained.

"I did it!" the redhead cheered for whatever reason, before turning deadly serious. Both boys stood up on their seats, angry and looking for a fight. The pair searched the rafters, and their eyes fell on the sword-thief.

Zabuza easily disregarded all the yelling and screaming, and watched what Zoro would do. He had never seen anyone use barbells as a weapon; especially not barbells of that size. Judging by how heavy those things appeared, the kid had to be incredibly strong. Zoro's attention was now also on the sword thief. It was at that moment, if Zabuza's face hadn't had bandages wrapped around it, his jaw would have popped off in shock.

Zoro took a step forward and faded out, only to appear *next* to the sword thief. It couldn't be...it just couldn't be... He had heard the stories growing up; heard them from tavern owners and fellow Shinobi; and from the various folks who traveled around Kiri for one reason or another. The stories themselves were honestly crazily outlandish, but the stories surrounding the *Kiri no Yuurei* was among the most infamous of tales involving Kiri's bloody history.

"Zabuza-sama...what...what *was* that?"

"A Ghost." Zabuza breathed, a grin forming on his face.

"*Really?*" Haku couldn't hide his shock. To think, he would ever see a *Kūhaku* in *his* lifetime!

Zabuza observed the sword-thief as a kusarigama shot towards him

from below, and a large pillar of sand shot up from behind, effectively opening a window for Zoro to retrieve his swords, and easily separated the bodyguard from Gato as he was forced to dodge.

Gato's eyes desperately looked around the room, obviously hoping for some kind of rescue. Except he and Zabuza hadn't come to any sort of agreement, and in all honesty – Zabuza didn't really care about Gato at that moment. He was too busy coming to the full realization that a *Kūhaku* was right there in front of him in the flesh and asking himself how and why.

"And worst of all..." there was the ring of metal as Zoro drew his sword. "You dared to threaten those brats."

"Wait!" Gato held up a hand, but Zoro only swung his sword towards him in response.

Gato's severed head and arm fell to the broken floor below them. It was an end that was far too good for the man.

"I surrender!" the voice of the wire-Nin shouted.

Zabuza eyed the decapitated Gato, and sighed. Well, working for Gato was out, which was annoying and slightly problematic. Not that he cared all that much. What would they do now...? Zabuza's gaze fell onto Zoro, then. If that kid was a *Kūhaku*... an idea crossed his mind to test whether or not the kid was the real deal, and not some sort of Jutsu like the Fourth Hokage had been famous for. Motioning to Haku to follow him, Zabuza and Haku slipped outside and waited.

About ten minutes later, Zoro and the two boys came out of the tavern, and Zabuza and Haku slipped ahead of them just a ways.

Zabuza performed the *Kirigakure no Jutsu* making walking the path near-impossible, and waited. Not once, did Zoro pause. He continued forward on the main path, as if the mist wasn't even there. Anyone else would have veered off within minutes or stopped to question why the mist had gotten so thick. The way Zoro moved wasn't like someone versed in the Silent Killing technique either.

Somewhere in the overabundance of *Kiri no Yuurei* stories, Zabuza had heard that *Kūhaku* couldn't get lost or something like that, and it seemed to be true.

As they left the village behind, Gaara looked up at Zoro. "Zoro-nii... what's the *Kiri no Yuurei*?"

Zoro shrugged indifferently. "It's one of the names for the Clan I'm from."

Zabuza smirked, upon overhearing their conversation. He couldn't help it. If simply moving through the fog hadn't, that absolutely *confirmed* it.

"Wow...you're from a Clan, 'ttebayo!" Naruto said in awe. "What are they called? What do you know about them?"

Before Zoro could answer, Zabuza finally made his presence known. "So you *are* from that accursed Clan. No use denying it. The fact that you didn't even get lost in the mist and you pretty much said it yourself is proof enough."

"He was one of the men in the tavern," Gaara supplied, staring suspiciously.

"What do you want?" Zoro asked, stepping protectively in front of the boys and putting a hand on one of his swords. Evidently, Zoro was more than ready for a fight if it came down to it.

Zabuza smiled from behind his bandaged face. "I want to make a proposition."

"...Not interested." Zoro replied without any hesitation.

"But you haven't even heard anything yet." Zabuza argued, not wanting to jump right into shouting – though he was sorely tempted. Not that he could blame him for being suspicious, but the least the kid could do was hear him out. They were on the same side, after all.

The redhead growled, *growled at him* the Demon of the Mist! Brat.

"You wanna hire me, or something? Look, I only became a Bounty Hunter so I could eat. I'm not interested in working for anyone."

"It's actually more of a mutual partnership." Zabuza insisted. Quickly, he added, "How about we start over?"

Straightening, he said, "The name's Momochi Zabuza, and this here's Haku."

Haku bowed politely and smiled. "Nice to meet you.

"...Roronoa Zoro."

"I'm Naruto..."

"Gaara."

There was a slightly awkward (only for Zabuza and Haku) silence that followed, before Zoro turned around saying, "Well, gotta go. It's been fun."

"Wait," Zabuza started. "I want to talk."

Zoro paused and gave Zabuza an annoyed glance. Sighing, Zoro said, "Fine, make it quick."

"Very well," Zabuza closed the almost ten-foot distance between him and Zoro by a few feet before Gaara stepped forward so that he was between him and Zoro, clinging protectively to the teen's arm. Naruto took hold of Zoro's arm on his other side, peering suspiciously at the man with intense blue eyes. It was almost cute how protective the two boys were of Zoro.

But onto other matters...

"Out of curiosity," Zabuza said, adjusting his sword slightly. "Where'd you get that hitai-ate? Because I know for a fact that you weren't in any of the graduating classes for what, the past twelve, thirteen years?" Zabuza casually shrugged as Zoro glanced at him. "And being a Kūhaku of all things, is a pretty big deal."

Zoro didn't answer, and simply glowered. He could have slapped himself right then. He had been so focused on getting Kuina's sword back from that bastard's grubby hands that he honestly hadn't even noticed that he had used his Kekkei Genkai. Well, not until this Zabuza guy pointed it out to him.

When the teen said nothing, Zabuza decided to add, "You don't have to tell me where you got it. But it's odd... all the Kūhaku were supposed to have disappeared almost 200 years ago. Have they been in hiding all this time?"

"Who knows?" Zoro shrugged. "I couldn't tell you."

Well, some of the stories said that the Kūhaku were to have been extremely secretive, so it was understandable and not surprising that Zoro was reluctant to share anything. Plus, the fact that he was using a weird name like Roronoa made him all the more a mystery. He probably didn't want people knowing that he was a Kūhaku, but that

little stunt at the bar was a huge giveaway. There were those who wouldn't know what they were witnessing until it was too late.

"So, where have you been all this time, then?" Zabuza took a closer look at Zoro's appearance. He noticed *green* hair poking out from under the teen's hitai-ate. Why did he have green hair? Was it some sort of odd fashion choice, or was he attempting to rebel against society's norms? An attempt to hide in plain sight? That didn't really make sense. It just made him stand out.

But there was more than just one thing off about the kid. For one, he was tan, he had silver eyes, and his teeth were well, normal. Clearly, Zoro didn't inherit the qualities of someone Kiri-born. Well...Zoro was the first Kūhaku he had ever met, so it wasn't like he could say otherwise. He must've inherited aspects of a non-Kiri parent.

"Here and there."

It was an annoying answer. Zabuza narrowed his eyes. He'd focus on that answer later. "I'm curious... why'd you return to Kiri, Roronoa?"

Zoro shrugged. "I have something to take care of, and don't have time to chat. So, I should be going now."

Haku silently watched Gaara, Naruto, and Zoro, analyzing their every move. He needed to be able to protect his precious person if either of their newest acquaintances decided to try anything. That redheaded boy had growled at Zabuza, which was curious, if not a little strange. He wondered about Zoro's answer. It was a curious one.

"Where are you headed?" Zabuza pressed, attempting to buy time to get Zoro to listen to him. Not that he expected Zoro to tell him, he just was trying to buy time to think.

Zoro was becoming somewhat annoyed. He glared at Zabuza. "Alright, what's with all the questions?"

It was Zabuza's turn to shrug. "Sorry, I couldn't help but be curious. With you being a Kūhaku and all; especially knowing what happened to them..." he gave Zoro a look that showed amused interest. "Or at least, having a very vague idea."

"...What happened to them?" Naruto couldn't help but be inquisitive now. He gave a half-hearted apologetic grin when Zoro sent him an annoyed glance, but Zoro couldn't hold back his curiosity either. He had heard some of the tales from Koshiro, and even a few from

various residents around the Elemental Nations in places he had visited. But he hadn't had the chance to actually ask a Kiri local what happened to them.

Zoro furrowed his brow. "What do you mean?"

Zabuza's eyes widened ever so slightly in realization. The kid didn't know. Judging from Zoro's earlier answer of "*Who knows? I couldn't tell you,*" Zabuza surmised that Zoro *knew* that he was a Kūhaku, but wasn't aware of everything he was capable of as a Kūhaku, or the Clan's bloody history. So he must have been raised outside of Kiri. Silently, Zabuza was pleased that Zoro was finally showing some form of interest. Wanting to know more about your lost heritage helped.

"The most popular version is that they all exploded and became one with the mist." Zabuza couldn't help from keeping the mild amusement out of his voice. It was a fascinating story, and it was honestly laughable how many people believed that version to be the most accurate and logical of them all. Naruto made a face, while Gaara glanced from Zabuza to Zoro, and back, trying gauge the proper reaction.

"They were active during the time of the First Mizukage, Gengetsu Hozuki. The Kūhaku *were* Kiri-Nin, but supposedly, they operated independently – for whatever reason, they decided to reside outside of Kirigakure. Because of their self-governing nature, they probably pissed off quite a few people, yet no-one could ever find them."

As many stories do, this one started with war; particularly an inevitable conflict between Kiri and Iwa. Many people who told such tales often claimed that the Kūhaku turned on their comrades and killed both Kiri and Iwa-Nin, before disappearing. The reasons given ranged from petty to political, or whatever suited the storyteller's fancy.

But there were those like Zabuza and a few others who believed that it had been the other way around; it was *Kiri* that turned on the Kūhaku, probably making some sort of twisted deal with Iwa. With both sides turning on the Kūhaku, they supposedly managed to kill a number of them, but Kiri and Iwa lost more men than they killed. After the battle, the Kūhaku all disappeared into nothing never to be seen or heard from again, and the tales of the *Kiri no Yuurei* began.

"If the two Kage did in fact make a deal of some kind, it completely fell through and they both ended up killing each other anyways. It

was that war in particular that officially earned Kiri its nickname of *"Bloody Mist"*."

"Wow." Naruto breathed.

"Okay...?" Zoro frowned. This bit of history while mildly interesting, was well, almost two-hundred years old, and really had nothing much to do with him.

"This is what I truly wanted to talk to you about, Roronoa."

"What?"

"I'm wondering if you'd be interested in joining our cause."

"Cause'?"

"To take back this country and restore it to its rightful glory."

If it had been at any other time, then perhaps Zoro would have smirked and asked about them making him the boss or something, but now... Zoro sighed heavily, his expression was unreadable. "I'm not interested in joining any rebellion of any kind. I said it before, I have stuff to take care of, so we have to get moving."

Zoro started walking again, not really waiting for either Zabuza or Haku, with the two boys on either side. But Zoro (and Gaara especially) kept an eye on him as if he were attacking at that moment.

Haku subtly glanced at Zabuza out of the corner of his eye, noting the annoyance on the man's features. A few tic-marks appeared on the man's forehead, and he was doing a very impressive job of reigning in his temper.

Zabuza took a deep breath, trying to think and calm himself down a bit. Zabuza started following after Zoro, and Haku obediently and silently trailed after him. A part of the man was admittedly desperate. After suffering the losses that they had, and with people who were recovering from their wounds; others who now had to be declared rogue-Nin and live their lives without a home to return to; and those who simply wanted to quit and no longer fight a losing battle... Zabuza would not beg, hell no. But he would force people to listen.

"Kūhaku, if you would-"

Stopping again and turning, "First of all, it's Roronoa. Second, I didn't

come here to fight any battles that have nothing to do with me."

Deeply sighing in annoyance and to reign in his temper, Zabuza glared at the path ahead. He would have argued that this battle had *everything* to do with the Kūhaku. After all, the First Mizukage had betrayed the Kūhaku, and now the Third Mizukage was on the warpath against those with Kekkei Genkai. So he tried a different approach, and it was mostly the truth.

"Roronoa, you killed Gato. Yeah, he was a f***king thorn in this country's side, and any respectable swordsman worth his blade would have declined his offer right then and there, but he was a financial opportunity for the rebellion to get a leg up on the Third Mizukage – who by the way is trying to rid the country of Kekkei Genkai, which is something that *you* possess. Still think it doesn't have anything to do with you?"

Silently, Zabuza housed his own glare. He resisted the urge to add, *'You owe me.'*

"...I didn't come here to join any battles." Zoro said again, letting his irritation show. But then, Zoro sighed heavily and brushed a hand over his face tiredly. "I can't."

"I want to work together for a common goal," Zabuza insisted. "Surely you want the same thing I do. Otherwise, you wouldn't have that mark through your hitai-ate."

It was a clear sign that the Shinobi who wore such a thing was no longer affiliated with their country. Why would he have a mark through his hitai-ate if he agreed with his country's ideals?

Given how Zoro didn't look the traditional Kiri-Nin and he hadn't been in any of the graduating classes that would have matched his age-group, Zabuza suspected that he had stolen it, for whatever reason. Only a fool would steal a marked hitai-ate. More often than not, a marked hitai-ate was putting a target on your back.

He had to wonder who the hitai-ate had belonged to, though. But he wasn't going to ask. Since Zoro was wearing the marked hitai-ate and was here in Kiri; that meant he had come home. In the end, Zabuza didn't really care who the thing belonged to.

Zoro decided he wouldn't mention Gaara had gotten it off of a dead guy.

"Scratching it was unintentional." Zoro rubbed the back of his head, and sighed again. "Look, sorry about that Gato-bastard, but I'm not involving myself in a war," Zoro motioned to the two boys next to him. "Especially when I have these brats with me." Zoro started walking again, and turned his head slightly so he could look at Zabuza over his shoulder. "So, thanks but no thanks."

Zabuza's patience had thinned severely, and it was an admirable feat that he hadn't outright attacked Zoro right there. Not killing him, as that would defeat the purpose; just knocking some sense into him. He suspected he knew why Zoro was there. Thinking back on their conversation, and the fact that he had just told Zoro, a Kūhaku, about the Kūhaku's mysterious history... he decided he would simply ask, just to gauge Zoro's reaction.

"You don't know anything about your Kekkei Genkai, do you?" The question caused Zoro to pause, and frown in a way that answered Zabuza's question. "You probably only know what you've heard, which is a pretty skewed version considering the bullshit people like to come up with; along with discovering some of what you could do on your own."

Zoro said nothing, except frown even more. His silence answered more than anything he could have answered with. Internally, Zabuza smirked. He then had an idea that hopefully would work.

In the northeast of Kiri, somewhere bordering on the ocean, there was an area that was believed to be cursed. It was always surrounded by an extremely thick fog; and people went out of their way to avoid it if they could. On occasion, there was a story about some fool who thought that using the fog as cover from an enemy was a good idea.

"How about this; I think I might know where the Kūhaku used to reside. I can guide you there."

Internally, Zoro sighed. If only he had just chased after that stupid swords-thief, than he wouldn't have Zabuza here trying to convince him to join his cause for some war.

He didn't really like Zabuza pestering him about joining this war. Yeah, he knew that Kiri recently had some serious inner conflict, and that just a week-and-a-half ago there had been a huge battle in Kirigakure. Judging by what Zabuza had said to him and the fact that he had a scratch through his hitai-ate, it was more than evident that Zabuza had been on the side of the insurgents.

"What's the catch?" Zoro asked, almost defensively.

"I just want you to listen to what I have to say; maybe afterwards, you'll change your mind."

Thinking about the people who were after Naruto, and all the craziness involved in that mess, along with the shit-storm that was Kiri, Zoro glared. "Look, there's some stuff going on, and I can't really stick around for too long. We have to keep moving. So-

"This is nothing more than a mutual partnership, Roronoa. It's simply me showing you to the area where I believe the Kūhaku used to reside, while in return you listen to why I'm fighting this war."

"Why should I trust you? You could just be leading us into a trap."

"Because I'm fighting for the rights of people like you," Zabuza replied. "The ones with Kekkei Genkai."

"It's true," Haku finally spoke up. "Zabuza-sama saved my life years ago. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't even be alive."

Zoro considered the girl...wait...he stopped for a moment to *really* look at...*him*. At first glance, it was easy to make the mistake, and the pink kimono didn't help. Haku had a very effeminate appearance; but the way he carried himself betrayed any femininity that he may have had.

"I can't go joining a war." Zoro stated firmly.

"And I won't force you. As I've said, I just want you to listen to what I have to say."

Zoro scowled, muttering under his breath, "Whatever."

Zoro just picked a direction and started walking again, deeming the conversation over.

Naruto sent Zoro and then Zabuza a curious glance, and shrugged, following after his brother.

Zabuza sighed as he pointed out, "You don't know where you're going!"

"I'll find my way." Zoro then muttered under his breath, "It's not like I got lost the last time I was here..."

Even though he had ended up in the desert... the logical explanation was that Kiri or even a bridge or the paths moved. Obviously.

Both the younger boys suddenly tensed, and both slowly turned to look back at Zabuza. Naruto frowned at Zabuza. "You know where we need to go?"

"I do. Or at least, I have a rough idea."

"I don't want to wander everywhere in this country, Zoro-nii..." Gaara said. "It's too cold."

"No way," Zoro muttered to the two younger boys. "I don't get lost... we don't need him."

"But if he knows where we need to be, we should at least listen." Gaara reasoned, shyly looking down at the ground. "I mean... he's offering and all..."

Haku spoke up now. "How about we just follow after you? I mean, it just so happens that we're headed in the same direction."

Which was actually true, since there was a safe house in the area.

Zoro scowled at the pair. "If you endanger either of these brats, I'll kill you."

"Zoro-nii, don't threaten the people who're helping us!" Naruto reprimanded in a harsh whisper.

Haku tensed, as he could hear the truth behind Zoro's words. Of course, the boy would kill without hesitation to protect Zabuza – even though he absolutely abhorred killing. If his master was threatened, Haku would give his life if he had to in order to protect him.

Gaara had released Zoro's hand and stood still for a moment and glared at the rogue Kiri-Nin. He waited a moment or two before glancing ahead to where Zoro and Naruto were, and then turned to the other pair. As if he were reading Haku's mind, he growled quietly, "If you do *anything* to Zoro-nii, I'll *kill* you."

Gaara's expression sent chills down even Zabuza's spine – mostly because it was unnerving to see such an expression on a child that young.

"Sand-brat, what are you doing?" Zoro called over his shoulder.

The moment was made all the more unnerving when the expression disappeared completely and Gaara was back to looking like a shy and timid boy within seconds.

"Coming!" Gaara called as he jogged to catch up with his brothers, and dutifully grasped Zoro's hand.

Haku sent an uneasy glance at Zabuza. "Forgive me for asking this, Zabuza-sama...but are you sure this is a good idea?"

"He's a Kūhaku." Zabuza replied. "If I can convince him to join our cause, then the chances of us winning the war will increase significantly."

Because, if an extinct Kekkei Genkai were to appear at a time when they were being purged, then certainly the people's hopes would be reignited, and there would be those who would see not all hope was lost. The Kūhaku were a terrifying Clan while they had been alive. He had heard the stories from people growing up and had always been fascinated by them; from people who were traveling through Kiri for one reason or another and hearing the versions of what other countries said about them; from Mei, who had managed to get her hands on a few surviving historical records. Just *one* Kūhaku would be enough to turn the tides in their favor, and not just in the manpower aspect.

It would raise morale.

Plus, those two kids had skills; even if they were unrefined.

The two Kiri-Nin caught up with the trio, easily ignoring the suspicious glare from Gaara; the curious one from Naruto; and the annoyed one from Zoro.

"We need to head this way, to the northeast," Zabuza pointed, indicating the path they needed to take. "From there, it's a matter of navigating the..."

Zabuza trailed off, watching as Zoro muttered, "Got it, northeast," and proceeded to immediately turn left, walking with the upmost confidence.

"Zoro-nii!" Naruto who had momentarily let go of Zoro's arm to tighten a strap on his sandal, quickly turned to grab Zoro's arm, pulling him back and looking annoyed. "The freak with no eyebrows said '*northeast*'!"

Zabuza quirked an invisible eyebrow at the nickname, and Haku muffled a laugh with his hand and disguised it as a cough.

"We just came from there," Gaara said, also pulling on Zoro's other arm. "You can hold my hand so you don't get lost, okay, Zoro-nii?"

Zoro's face heated up in a mix of irritation and embarrassment. "I don't get lost, you brats!" Zoro suddenly grew fangs as he snarled at Zabuza and Haku both, "I *don't* get f**king lost! Your directions were confusing! Just say right or left, dammit!"

"I didn't say you did..." muttered Zabuza under his breath. What was so hard to understand about heading northeast? He had even indicated the direction.

"You're an interesting one, Zoro-san," Haku said with a smile, obviously enjoying the situation.

Zoro proceeded to pout, muttering obscenities under his breath.

Zabuza proceeded to lead the way, since he was the only one who had an idea of where they needed to go. Haku walked mostly by Zabuza's side, but positioned himself between his master and the odd trio. The older boy had to admit that he found humor with Zoro, and thought that they were very interesting.

Keeping a hold on Zoro's coat sleeve, Naruto asked, "So where are we going?"

The kid was asking that *now*? With a slightly amused (but still annoyed) sigh, Zabuza answered, "In the northeast of Kiri, there's supposedly a haunted island just off the coast. People have gone in and swear that they've only been gone for a few hours when in reality, it's been days; in some cases, even weeks."

"How did you find out about this place?" Zoro asked, now reluctantly following along.

"I got caught in it once, around the time I first became a Chuunin." Zabuza shrugged. "I was in the area on a mission with my team. We had to sail out towards the Land of Swamps, and ended up getting caught in a thick fog. It was obviously a Genjutsu, but we couldn't dispel it. We managed to get out of it, and made our way towards the meeting point, but no one was there to meet us. Turned out the client had been killed while waiting for us, and the Mizukage was furious with us when we finally returned several weeks later."

"Wow..." Naruto breathed. That sounded scary! But also really cool.

"So...how long were you in that weird fog?" Gaara asked, failing at pretending not to be interested.

"Almost two and a half weeks. Each of us swore up and down that we had been lost for only a few hours before reaching the Land of Swamps. Anyway, we had to mark down on a map where we at least thought we had been caught in the fog, so that other teams knew to avoid it, but it still got confusing. Having a compass didn't help things, either. The needle was completely skewed the entire time we were trapped. Even though we had a rough idea of where the fog was, it was difficult to pinpoint where it began."

Haku now spoke up, smiling at the boys. "There's numerous stories about one of the islands that surrounds Kiri which disappeared hundreds of years ago. A lot of the stories I've heard is that the vengeful ghosts of the *Kiri no Yuurei* haunt the island, and if you ever see it, it's certain doom."

"Really?" Naruto's eyes shined.

"Why's that?" Gaara asked, starting to become visibly entranced.

Haku's voice took on a mysterious air. "Because that blood-soaked island is the only destination you can now go. Everywhere else is closed off to you. Even if you tried to get away through the fog and back the way you had come, you would always come back to the island, and it would be even closer than before. The more you try to escape, the closer the island and your death comes."

"That's scary!" Naruto said, pulling closer to Zoro.

Gaara stared at the ground, thinking. "How did these people get lost? And how do you know that it actually happened if those people died? If no-one ever came back from that island, then where did the story even come from? The fishermen we talked with before mentioned people know to avoid the fog when it gets thick, but there were stories of ships getting lost..."

"Well, it is just a story," Haku shrugged, amused at Gaara's over-analyzation of the story. "Perhaps there's a sliver of truth in there somewhere, or maybe someone just wanted to tell a scary story, and others simply expanded on it."

"Do you know any more stories?" Naruto asked hopefully.

Haku nodded with a smile.

Gaara pretended not to be listening as Haku started telling a story about how the Kūhaku would spirit people (especially children) away, with Zabuzza adding in the occasional comment here and there.

Zoro just listened in silence, wondering how much of the various parts of the stories were even true. Some of the things sounded outlandish, even to him.

Before long, they had to stop for the night. They found cover in a small hovel under a tree that was just big enough for all of them. Gaara volunteered to watch for the night, since he didn't need to sleep.

It was an odd comment, but of course, both Zabuzza and Haku thought that the trio was odd. What was one more thing? So they filed away that bit of information and settled in for the night.

Zoro took a spot besides Gaara, and Naruto joined him on his other side. Zabuzza found himself drifting off, while Haku remained close by. If anyone attacked them with Zabuzza as their target, the young teen made sure that he would be the first to get hit.

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Waking from a dreamless sleep, Zabuzza groaned, feeling something poking his cheek, and he opened his eyes. Blinking a few times to let his vision adjust, and remembering he was no longer in the middle of a battle, he looked into the green eyes of Gaara who suddenly froze with a very nervous look on his face.

"Naruto, he's awake." Gaara stated the obvious, as he slowly turned to face the blond.

Zabuzza slowly sat up and looked at the two boys suspiciously, noticing that Gaara had something black in his hand. The redhead quickly hid the black object behind his back and stood with an impassive look that failed to make him look less guilty while Naruto stood close by with a foxy grin.

"Good morning, Zabu-san!" Naruto said with a laugh.

Zabuzza blinked incredulously a few times. "...Zabu-san?"

"Yep! I'm gonna call ya that now, 'ttebayo!"

Gaara just continued to stare at him impassively. "Zoro-nii and Haku have prepared breakfast. They told us to wake you."

The two boys left the small hollow of the tree, and went back outside.

Zabuza took care of his morning duties and joined the others at breakfast. Haku was stirring something in a pot over a covered fire, while Zoro scowled like his usual self as he drank some water from his flask.

"Morning all," Zabuza grunted. He wondered why both Naruto and Gaara (especially the former) were trying not to laugh as they looked at him.

Haku smiled as he looked up, "Good morning, Zabuza-sa..." his voice slowly drifted off as he gaped at his master.

Zoro glanced up at Zabuza, and he recoiled as his gaze landed on the man. "What the f*** happened to your face?! That's scary!"

That was when Naruto started cackling and Gaara covered his grin in an even sorrier attempt to not look guilty.

Haku then started laughing as well, and now Zoro couldn't help but smirk.

"What's going on?" Zabuza very nearly snarled.

Haku complied through his laughter and created an ice mirror for Zabuza to look in.

The sight that met Zabuza was a ridiculous reflection of him with thick, scribbled-on eyebrows, and a big, black mole. Zabuza scowled and glared at the two perpetrators. While he was annoyed, the man had to admit that he was impressed. The fact that two *kids* had snuck up on *him*, was a feat unto itself.

Still, Zabuza sighed heavily, visibly trying to reign in his temper. Little brats! Muttering numerous obscenities under his breath, Zabuza stomped off to clean his face, and Naruto broke out into a full-blown cackle. A part of the Kiri-Nin was questioning if putting up with those brats was going to be worth it. But still... it was clear that the two brats were still *children*. Sure, they had gotten involved in the fight at the bar, but the pair still retained some of their innocence, even during these times.

He thought about Zoro, the kid who had shown up out of seemingly nowhere, who was extremely skilled with his swords and the various stories that popped up about him spoke of that skill from those that had witnessed it. Zoro seemed to be one of those do-gooder types; because he had heard a few stories about Zoro going after thugs and tyrants. That was made abundantly clear when he killed Gato. That fact alone raised some hope that Zoro would agree to join them.

Rumors of a skilled three-sword-wielding Kenjutsu-user had spread through the grapevine, and Kushimaru had mentioned once or twice how he wanted to fight Zoro if ever given the chance. Maybe he would be. The kid would be even more excited knowing that Zoro was a Kūhaku.

It was evident that Zoro had more than one death on his hands, yet it hadn't really hardened the kid, and the two brats who were with him... well, Zabuza was sure that something was up with Gaara. The kid seemed...*off*. One moment, the kid appeared timid and shy; other times he smiled as if he were somehow unused to doing so, so it was very awkward. But then... there was the time that Gaara had threatened to kill him and Haku, it was said without any hesitation or remorse. It was undisputed truth. The way Gaara watched him and Haku at times reminded Zabuza too much of a predator, coiling itself and preparing to strike. And the way he controlled that sand...

Zabuza sighed as he finished scrubbing off his face.

He had spent a good portion of yesterday telling Zoro about Mei, the one that they had appointed Mizukage and were trying to get into the official position. He also told Zoro of the Blood Purges that the Mizukage had started, roughly six years ago.

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Yesterday...

"Wait, let me get this straight..." Zoro frowned and narrowed his eyes. "You're saying this guy's spreading lies and fear about holders of Kekkei Genkai and trying to annihilate them?"

"It happened in my family almost seven years ago, Zoro-san." Haku said, glancing to the side sadly. "My mother was from a Clan, and she had married a civilian man... I discovered my ability and I proudly went to show her, but instead of being proud, she slapped me and told me never to do it again." Haku took a deep breath, and the air around him dropped in temperature. "My father saw me...he gathered a mob

and while they managed to kill my mother, I activated my abilities and killed them before they could me."

Zoro wasn't sure what to say to that. 'Sorry' didn't really seem to cut it.

Zabuza took over explaining once again. "He started out small, claiming that those with Kekkei Genkai harbored air-borne diseases; that they would kill people in their sleep while they thought they were safe in their homes. He started spreading his lies roughly nine years ago and the mass hysteria escalated. Normal people became terrified of those with Kekkei Genkai..." Zabuza growled out, "They killed women and children; dragged them through the streets and strung them up."

Naruto shivered, and subconsciously reached a hand to touch his own neck.

"Why's he weakening his own country?" Zoro asked incredulously. "That really seems counter-productive."

"We don't know. It's insane rambling as far as I'm concerned." Zabuza answered. "At one point, there was talk of his son Yagura taking over the position. But there was worry the kid would follow in his father's footsteps, so Mei decided that we would move much sooner than originally planned."

"So where's this Yagura kid now?"

"With the rebels. You'll get to meet him if you decide to come with us. He acts serious, but he's a little smartass."

Zoro sighed, and stared at the ground. "I said I can't go joining a rebel army..."

"Why not?" Haku asked, tilting his head. Zoro hadn't given his reason.

"We have places to be, and it's complicated. Besides, I think we can manage getting there on our own. You should go."

"Actually, I find myself enjoying getting to annoy you." Zabuza said with a smirk. "So, I think we'll stick around."

Zabuza didn't mind waiting a few days more; but he could do without the headache.

Naruto practiced with his kusarigama while Haku observed with genuine interest. He had known one other person who had used that weapon, and she had been an expert in using it. Akiko and Haku had trained together, and she had trained against him and his Ice Mirrors using her favorite weapon.

It was clear that Naruto was still learning to use the weapon, but he definitely had some skill. At one point, Naruto must have some sort of misjudgment because as he pulled the blade towards himself, he almost gave himself a very nasty cut on his leg. The blond quickly jumped away, and yanked on the connected chain, making the blade portion move oddly.

Naruto stared at the kusarigama for a moment or two before a wide grin spread across his face. Grabbing his weapon, he ran over to Zoro calling, "Zoro-nii! Zoro-nii!"

Zoro, who had been taking a nap right then opened one eye lazily looking at the boy. Upon seeing Naruto with his kusarigama, Zoro sat up quickly with both eyes open. "What is it?"

He couldn't help but wonder if Naruto was somehow hurt, even though there was no blood. Was someone else hurt?

...Why would he even think such a thing?

Naruto held his kusarigama out to Zoro. "Could you help me wrap this in something? I just want to wield it really cool, just like you do your swords, 'ttebayo." Naruto admitted, looking down at the ground and stabbing his toe in the dirt. "You said to master the basics, and that my weapons aren't toys. So...I wanna develop my own style...I thought you'd probably get mad if I started doing something with my kusarigama that wasn't what..." Naruto paused, not wanting to reveal his teachers' names. "What I was shown to do."

An odd look came over Zoro's face. Seriously? Once again, Zoro found himself in a situation involving Naruto where he didn't know how to react or respond. Instead, Zoro snorted and said, "Practice all the 'cool moves' you want; just remember to be careful, got it? And I have some Ninja Tape here that you can have."

Naruto excitedly rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet as he watched Zoro wrap his weapon.

"Here, brat."

Zoro gave the kusarigama back to Naruto, who beamed at him before running off to train.

"Thanks, Zoro-nii!" Naruto called over his shoulder.

He began making odd moves, attempting various ways to adjust the course of the weapon; but the blade hadn't struck the intended target of a tree stump just yet. Ever persistent, Naruto continued to try.

Haku watched Naruto try to spin his weapon while simultaneously do some sort of twisting motion with his arms. Perhaps if Naruto had had a different type of chained weapon, the odd moves would have worked. But right now, he just looked awkward. Haku stopped counting the number of times Naruto would have cut off an appendage if it hadn't been for the Ninja tape wrapped around the blade.

Haku smiled at Zoro, thoroughly amused.

"What?" Zoro snapped when he caught Haku looking at him with that expression.

"Naruto-kun really admires you, Zoro-san." Haku looked over at Gaara, who appeared to be either meditating or sleeping. The young teen couldn't help but smile as he added, "Gaara-kun does as well; and he really cares for you. I can tell by how you act towards them; you genuinely care for them."

"...And?" Zoro asked, not sure where Haku was going with this.

"I'm glad." Haku smiled genuinely. "Naruto-chan and Gaara-chan have found their precious person that they are willing to do anything for."

Zoro briefly paused, considering Haku's words. A few months ago, his plans had essentially been thrown out thanks to the presence of not one, but *two* kids. Initially, he had planned to make one last stop in Konoha before coming to Kiri and finding out anything he could about the Kūhaku, and maybe spar with the Seven Swordsmen if given the chance to test his skills. But with having promises to protect the boys and essentially prevent a genocide, and oh, best not forget that some legendary Sannin guy was on his tail; Zoro didn't have the time he thought he would exploring Kiri.

But...he wasn't complaining. He had been genuinely concerned when he thought that Naruto was going to be taken that one time. And no way in hell could he have left Gaara back in Suna with the knowledge

of what Rasa was doing. He would have convinced Gaara to come with him whether or not Naruto had been there. Zoro had determined long ago that he would make choices without regrets; consequences be damned.

Zoro's response to Haku was to snort, "Yeah, whatever...so what's with you and Tape-Face?"

Haku smiled, amused at the nickname. "He saved my life and gave me a purpose. I'm willing to do whatever it takes for him to fulfill his dream."

"Yeah? What's the dream?"

"To see this country flourish."

Zoro just nodded, he could understand where Haku was coming from. He turned to Zabuza, whose eyes looked mildly amused at the conversation between him and Haku. It was like the man was silently teasing the older teen with the most subtle of eye-crinkles. Zoro resisted the sudden urge to flip Zabuza off, or maybe let one of his swords carve the man's bandaged face – the expression irritated him that much.

Zoro thought about telling Zabuza that he was probably really ugly, and that was why he had a bandaged face.

Instead, Zoro crossed his arms and scowled. "How much longer till we reach that foggy island?"

"Depending on how frequently we stop and how long, probably later this evening, or early tomorrow afternoon." Zabuza answered.

"Well, let's get going now." Zoro said, trying to mask his impatience. "What are we waiting for? Your eyebrows to finally grow in?" Zoro added another comment under his breath, "We'll be here forever if that's the case..."

"Damn green-haired brat!" Zabuza growled in annoyance. He took note of Zoro's attempt at hiding his impatience, wondering why he was trying to act like he wasn't in a hurry. "It's only been fifteen minutes. We can wait a bit more." He motioned to Gaara. "Besides, he's meditating. We can wait for a bit more."

Zoro just marched over and picked Gaara up by the strap of his gourd. "Well, when he's done, we'll already be on the road."

Zoro started walking, and Haku bit back a smile as the older teen marched with the upmost confidence in the wrong direction (*again*). Naruto ran after Zoro as if it were second nature and dragged him back to where the other two were, berating a scowling Zoro the entire time. Zabuza bit back a curse and resisted the urge to face-palm.

Gaara came to about twenty minutes later, looking absolutely irritated. He blushed when he noticed Zoro was carrying him, and muttered an apology about having to be carried. But once he was on his own two feet, whether or not he had been sleeping or simply meditating, Gaara didn't look rested. He was slightly snippy at those around him, and he was muttering insults under his breath.

Neither Zabuza nor Haku caught everything that he said, but from what they could tell, it involved a stupid and stubborn raccoon, the cold and the wet, accompanied by several words and phrases that they were genuinely surprised existed in Gaara's vocabulary.

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They walked in companionable silence for a while, and the fog around them began to steadily grow thicker. It was one of the natural occurrences in Kiri, and anyone dumb enough to get lost in the fog didn't deserve to be called a Kiri resident. Sticking to the designated path became all-the-more important as a thick forest slowly appeared around them.

It had been awhile since they had stopped, and Zoro sighed as he began to feel the subtle call of nature.

"Let's stop for a moment; I gotta piss."

"Don't dawdle. This area's dangerous." Zabuza nodded his head towards a little ways to the east of their position, indicating a large structure several miles from where they were. "The Kaguya's compound is that way. Although they aren't as much of a threat as they used to be, we still don't want to have a run-in with them."

The Kaguya were insane, and that was saying something coming from Zabuza. They tended to be relentless f*ckers when on the battlefield. After they had lost their Kekkei Genkai several decades ago, their solution was to simply attack their opponents and even use their own Clan members as meat shields and whatever else to help them win fights.

"Got it. Kaguya bad." Zoro pulled away from the two boys, and Gaara

almost moved to follow him. But he stopped when Zoro held up a hand. "I don't need a supervisor, sand-brat."

"But what if something happens?" Gaara asked.

"Like what?" Zabuza spoke up, giving Zoro the chance to some privacy behind one of the trees. "You think Roronoa's just going to up and disappear?"

Zabuza didn't like the looks either of the two boys were giving him.

"Who are the Kaguya?" Gaara asked, deciding that if they had to wait for Zoro to finish, they might as well talk about something interesting.

"They were once a proud and powerful Clan with an incredible Kekkei Genkai." Zabuza explained. "They could use their own bone structure as weapons – with how fast they could generate and regenerate their bones, they had an endless supply of weapons. But, their Kekkei Genkai died out, which is the only reason the Third Mizukage hasn't targeted them."

"What happened to them?" Naruto looked on with interest.

"Who knows? They're sadistic inbreeders who can't tell the difference between their own sister and a cow, so a few bad genes get passed through and was allowed to fester and grow."

"How does that happen?" Gaara furrowed his own non-existent eyebrows.

"What's inbreeding?" Naruto asked.

"Well, obviously when they were f*cking each other-" Zabuza paused to look at the two boys. "Has Roronoa told you how sex works?"

"What's sex?" Gaara asked. He was vaguely familiar with the term, but he wasn't sure how it all worked together. He had the rough idea that when a man and a woman got together, somehow a baby came out of their doing *something*. He also had knowledge of a few terms thanks to Ichibi.

Naruto raised his hand excitedly. "Oh, I know, I know! Sex is when two people make funny noises together."

Gaara turned to Naruto. "Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know, like this..." Naruto began making odd panting and

groaning noises, and Haku just stared slack-jawed while Zabuza glared at the spot where Zoro was taking an exceptionally long piss-break.

Looking for anything to change the topic of conversation, Haku started, "Uh, Naruto-kun, how about we talk about how your kusarigama skills are coming?"

Zabuza resisted the urge to bang his head against one of the trees. He *did not* want to be having *this* conversation with kids! This was Zoro's job, dammit! He marched over to where Zoro was behind the tree, saying, "What the hell is taking so long-" he stopped for a moment before walking in a complete circle around the tree. "Where the hell did Roronoa go?!"

Naruto slapped his forehead. "Dammit! It happened again!"

Gaara gave Zabuza a comforting pat on his arm. "Don't worry, Zabu-jii, Zoro-nii didn't abandon us; he promised. So, he'll be back."

Zabuza just glared and heaved a heavy sigh. This had better be worth the headache that nearly was starting to rival a hangover.

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Meanwhile, Zoro had found himself in some sort of building. Where was he? How had he ended up here? *Dammit!* The stupid path had moved! He wasn't lost; he just wasn't sure where he was. Big difference. Zoro navigated dimly lit hallways; the only light source being the torches that lined the walls, spaced just far enough apart that the light emanating from them lit only what was necessary; leaving gaps of darkness a few inches wide.

The interior was made entirely of wood, and Zoro wasn't sure how long he had been walking for before he came into a rather spacious room. It looked to be made out of stone; and was smooth. There was no lighting, save for one lone torch that was on the opposite wall from where Zoro had entered, bathing the rest of the room in darkness.

"Damn, this isn't the exit either..." Zoro muttered.

"Hello?" Someone in the darkness called out.

Zoro jerked and faced the voice, hand automatically reaching for Wado Ichimonji. "H-hello?"

"I haven't seen you here before...who are you? Are you working with

my family?"

"Zoro...and you are?"

"Kimimaro."

Zoro's eyes finally adjusted to the darkness, and he couldn't help but say something about what he saw. "Why the hell are you in a cage?"

He could see a boy who was around Haku's age, give or take a few years sitting on the floor inside a large wooden cage covered in various lock and trap Seals.

Kimimaro wondered why the stranger was so angry about his being in a cage. This had always been his existence for as long as he could remember.

"My family's scared of me...they can't do my Clan's Kekkei Genkai, and well... I can."

"That's no reason to lock someone up!" Zoro shot back, his anger about the situation growing. He briefly studied the various Seals covering the cage. He recognized that more than a few of them triggered some pretty nasty traps. "This isn't right!"

"Why not?"

Zoro stared at the kid, who must've had a f*cked up childhood to actually ask that question. Dammit, Zoro rubbed the back of his head. He probably shouldn't get involved, but...dammit, he couldn't go back to minding his own business knowing that this kid was here. "That does it, I'm getting you out of here. No way am I leaving you here."

"You can't, there's exploding tags and the key-" Kimimaro was cut off when Zoro suddenly appeared in the cage with him. Staring at Zoro wide-eyed, he whispered, "You have a Kekkei Genkai too?"

"Yep, let's go."

"But my Clan..."

Zoro put a hand on Kimimaro's shoulder, and looked the boy straight in the eyes. "Do you wanna to stay here, locked up, or do you want to get out of here?"

"You mean...outside?"

Zoro snorted. "Yeah, where else?"

Kimimaro stared at the ground, thinking. He was only ever let out of his cage when something was needed of him; and that was when his Clan wanted him to fight.

"...Do you need me to fight?"

Surprise appeared on Zoro's face, and he looked irritated, "What?! No! Is that what they use you for?"

"I'm the perfect weapon." Kimimaro answered simply. With a frown he asked, "Why don't you need me to fight?"

"Kid, I have my own fighting skills; I don't need you to do it for me."

"Then...what is my purpose? If I leave, what will I do?"

"I don't know, that's not up to me. That kind of thing's entirely up to you."

"I can make my own decisions?" Kimimaro asked slowly, as if the very concept had been unheard of. No-one had ever given him that choice. He simply just *was*. Nothing more.

Frowning, the young teen stared at the floor before glancing up at the doorway he knew his relatives always came through when they either were going to feed him or let him out to fight, only to be locked up again. And now, he was being offered his freedom, and the right to make his own decisions.

What was the outside world like beyond the battlefield? A part of him was scared of leaving everything he had ever known; which mostly consisted of his prison. That part of him was telling him to stay, because what was out there for him? Here, didn't he have a purpose? But yet... Kimimaro's eyes glanced around his cage before landing on the doorway where his Clan members always came and went whenever they wanted something of him. But yet...why was he not satisfied with this life, and why did he hesitate to leave it? What was stopping him, now that he was being offered the chance to leave? When would he be given this chance again?

Slowly, he looked up at Zoro.

"I want to get out of here."

Zoro smirked and patted Kimimaro's shoulder in a "good choice" gesture. Holding onto the younger teen and simply "stepping out" of the cell was the easy part, now, Zoro had to find his way outside. So he purposefully focused, trying to get back outside. He imagined the twisted pathway, picturing Naruto, Gaara, Zabuza, and Haku standing there, and he took a step forward.

It wouldn't be until hours later when Kimimaro was long gone that a member of the Kaguya clan entered the room with a meal ready for the monster.

"Alright, time to eat..." the woman pushed the tray into the cage, and waited for Kimimaro to take it. But nothing happened,

"Hey!" she smacked a trap-free area of the cage, "Wake up!"

But, there was no movement; not even a sound from anywhere within the cage.

"What? Kimimaro? Are you sick?"

The woman pulled a key from her pocket to unlock the cage, and she stepped inside, only to be met with an *empty* cell. How?! She quickly checked the Seals and found that none of them had been activated. None of their alarms had even triggered! *How* was this even possible?

She checked the walls and the floor as well, and since she was at it, she checked the ceiling too. But there was no sign of digging, nor were there any indications of an Earth Jutsu being used. All she could find on the walls were dozens upon dozens of tally marks from Kimimaro keeping track of the passing days.

She ran out to report this to the Clan's Head. The man would be *furious*!

The entire Kaguya Clan was in an uproar, of course... but they could do nothing, as they had no idea how Kimimaro had gotten out, and if someone had taken him; they had no idea who it was and how they had done it. None of them were trackers, so they couldn't go looking for him easily.

What could they possibly do now, with their most powerful weapon gone? They had an upcoming battle, and it was highly doubtful they could survive it without him.

Outside with Zabuza and the others, it had been nearly an hour since Zoro had disappeared. Both of the younger boys had simply started playing some sort of game in the dirt while they waited; simply accepting the fact that Zoro had gotten lost somewhere. They accepted this a little too easily for Zabuza's comfort, but both of them had been pretty adamant that Zoro wouldn't ever leave them, simply because "he had promised."

Of course, neither of them denied their worry, but Zoro had a pretty consistent track record of wandering off only to reappear where he had been.

Neither of the boys felt like talking to their Biju. The fact of the matter was, when talking to them, the boys would lose all concept of time, so they wanted to be ready to leave once Zoro appeared; so Naruto showed Gaara how to play some sort of tic-tac-toe game.

A few miles ahead of their position on the road, there was a startled shout followed by the sound of something crashing into the trees, followed closely by muffled cursing. Zabuza glared in the direction of the person, partially hoping it was someone he could slice up with his precious sword. If that person was Zoro, Zabuza was planning on giving the guy an earful; after all, *he* had been in a hurry – only to make them wait for almost an hour while he traipsed through the forest.

Both Naruto and Gaara shot up and ran for the noise. "Zoro-nii!"

Zoro clamored out of the forest on their left, covered in scrapes, leaves and twigs, and he wasn't alone. Naruto and Gaara stopped to take in the sight of the pale boy accompanying their brother, while Zabuza took in the sight of him as well.

The boy was rubbing his head and lower back. It was a good thing his bones were as strong as they were; otherwise he was sure he would have broken a few. "Were we supposed to land in the forest from that high up?"

"Oi, not my fault the path was moving around."

"...But the trails here don't move like that..." Kimimaro was also nursing an already goose-egg-sized bump on the back of his head from when he had made particularly painful contact with a tree limb.

Zabuza wasn't really paying attention to what the boy was saying as he took in his appearance. Pale, with red marks on his forehead and

eyelids, and his hair styled in the traditional Kaguya style... and considering that the Kaguya compound was a few miles away... how on earth...?!

"What the *hell*, Roronoa?!" Zabuza pointed at Kimimaro, and ignored the growling noise that emanated from the redhead standing a few feet away from him. "Why do you have *another* kid?!"

"They had him locked up." Zoro replied as if that explained everything. "So I let him out."

While Zabuza wasn't the type to condone locking up children, he didn't-*couldn't* understand *how* Zoro had found the kid in the first place. So he voiced his confusion that was rapidly mixing itself into frustrated anger. "That doesn't explain *why* you have some kid with you! *How* did you even *find* him?"

"Well, you people got yourselves lost, and while I was looking for you, I ended up in a room where he," Zoro indicated Kimimaro, "was locked up. I asked if he wanted to leave with me, and he said 'yes'. So here we are."

A near-visible tick-mark appeared on Zabuza's forehead, and before Naruto could argue that Zoro was the one who got himself lost, Zabuza inexplicably found himself yelling,

"How the *hell* were *we* the ones to get f*cking lost?! *We* never even moved! *You're* the one who wandered off and brought back some kid while you were at it, Roronoa!"

Zabuza couldn't figure it out. It was like something about Zoro (and even those two brats at times) swept him out of his impulse control and into their own stride, and tested every aspect of his patience. And where the *hell* did his logic come from?! Were all the Kūhaku like this when they were alive? If that were the case, and Kiri had in fact betrayed them, Zabuza was seriously wondering if it was because people had to deal with this type of bullshit.

Completely ignoring Zabuza's outburst much to his annoyance, Zoro was introducing Kimimaro to Naruto and Gaara, commenting, "Get along well – got it, brats?"

Zabuza was sorely tempted to yell at Zoro about paying attention, but deemed that a fruitless effort. Instead, he opted to glower at the teen.

Haku studied Kimimaro for a moment, noticing the emptiness in his

eyes... that had been the same look he had had before Zabuza-sama had found him. But then, upon Naruto grinning blindingly up at him and Gaara smiling in his shy, awkward way, there was a spark of life in Kimimaro, brief as it was.

That of course, begged the question:

"Why were you locked up?" Haku asked, remembering the passing mention of it.

Kimimaro hesitated, then raised his hand and proceeded to pull out his radius from his forearm and held it out for them to inspect. Both Zabuza and Haku's eyes widened at the sight. They had only heard stories about this!

"My Clan sees me as a monster..." Kimimaro started to explain, but he was cut off.

"That's *awesome!*" Naruto was staring transfixed at the bone in Kimimaro's hand.

"..." Gaara looked up at Kimimaro. "Can I have it?"

"Well, that's somethin' you don't see every day." Zoro simply commented, choosing not to voice how thoroughly creeped out at the sight he truly was.

Looking mildly perplexed at the attention he was receiving, Kimimaro slowly nodded and handed the bone over to Gaara who smiled and eyed it as if he had gotten a new toy.

"Thank you."

"Y-yeah..."

"Uh, well... sorry I didn't get the chance to introduce myself earlier, but my name's Haku." Haku turned somewhat to introduce Zabuza, "And this is Zabuza-sama."

Zabuza glowered, but he gave a brief nod of his head.

"Well, let's get going." Zoro said, starting to walk back towards the forest. "Try not to get lost again."

"The last person who should be saying that is you!" Naruto yelled, pointing at Zoro, and Zabuza couldn't help but agree.

Both he and Gaara took their spots on either side of Zoro, pulling him the direction they needed to go. Zabuza took in a deep breath. He was seriously contemplating at some point during this journey he would have to tell Zoro to stop collecting children.

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Kimimaro had never been this far away from home by himself – well, he wasn't by himself – well, away from his Clan for this long. He carefully observed the people around him: there was Haku, who looked deceptively female and would get irritated when his gender was mistaken. His explanation for not appearing more masculine was so that people would naturally drop their guard around him. Women would often be seen as more delicate and weaker; and depending on the target, would allow Haku in close for the kill.

Zabuza was an interesting man. Kimimaro had heard brief mention of him before from his family. Zabuza was a threat to Kiri, and had to be eliminated. But from what Kimimaro could gather about him, he was a man who loved his country and hated what it had become. He was fighting for people like Kimimaro – holders of Kekkei Genkai. He also spent various amounts of time talking to Zoro about a resistance that he wanted him to join, along with various aspects of Kiri's history, which was interesting.

Zoro was an oddity, and was a holder of a thought-to-be extinct Kekkei Genkai himself. Kimimaro had a difficult time reading the older teen. He made comments and spouted insults with no real malice behind them. His younger brothers, Naruto and Gaara clung to him often, and in Kimimaro's experience, calling someone a "brat" was a derogatory term. But in Zoro's case, it was a term of endearment. He often was scowling at everyone, but when it came to the two younger boys, his expression softened ever so slightly.

Haku, Naruto, and Gaara all welcomed him easily, while Zoro talked to him some, and Zabuza scowled at him through the bandages on his face. Zabuza didn't treat Kimimaro badly or anything, but he just seemed irritated – not at Kimimaro, but at Zoro.

Kimimaro really liked these people...was this what it was like having friends?

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Haku and Zabuza both noticed it within hours of their trip. Whenever either of them tried to talk to Zoro about himself, he usually gave

grunts or half-assed answers, if not a few not-very-helpful words. Zoro would actually ask questions about something that required long answers; such as things involving Kiri's history, and the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist and their swords. While Zabuza had talked some about the people involved with the resistance, he only gave various names and vague descriptions without revealing anything at all. One of the things that Zabuza would mention often was Mei's personal goals for Kiri; how she wanted it to profit and have peace with the surrounding countries.

Naruto and Gaara (mostly Naruto) would do most of the talking. Naruto could talk a mile a minute about ramen, and had spent a good two hours talking about "the most awesome food in the world" and "it's too bad that Kiri doesn't have any ramen places. You should tell that Mei lady she should order some ramen places to be built when she becomes Mizukage". The blond also talked about training and getting stronger, and that he wanted to be an awesome Ninja someday whose name shook the World.

Gaara often asked questions about stories surrounding folklore and history, and often listened with rapt attention. But it seemed that when it came to the fantastical stories, Gaara always had questions about the logic behind the stories. He also had a knack for pointing out plot holes.

Still, Haku humored the boy, answering his questions where and when he could.

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Haku had noticed how Zoro often rested his hand on his white sword as they walked, and even as they rested, he held onto it like some sort of lifeline. Zabuza had also noticed how it was that particular sword Zoro took special care of. Sure, he took good care of his other two blades, but the white sword was obviously special.

So without prompting, Haku asked, "Zoro-san, why is that white blade so precious to you?"

Zoro paused only briefly, to look down at his sword. A rare look of fondness crossed his features before replying, "This sword belonged to a friend of mine...it carries the weight of our promise."

"What would that be?" Kimimaro asked curiously.

"To be the greatest swordsman in the world." Zoro said, sending a

glare at the others. "Don't you dare laugh. I'll more than happily make you apologize at the end of my blades if you do."

"That's a pretty lofty goal, Roronoa." Zabuza said. "But who am I to talk? I'm just trying to liberate a country from a madman."

What sort of person would have a goal like that in mind, Zabuza had to wonder. It was not only lofty, but dangerous, and foolish. The way Zoro said it though... it wasn't just some sort of passing remark.

"What is the name of your friend?" Gaara now asked.

An odd, wistful expression crossed Zoro's face as he looked down at his sword again. Zoro certainly hadn't been schooled in concealing his emotions. "...Her name was Kuina."

"Was she strong like you?" Naruto questioned.

Even though he knew that Zoro had made that promise, this was the first time Zoro had ever talked about his friend, so Naruto wanted to know more about her.

Zoro huffed before smiling. "I couldn't ever beat her. 3,000 fights and she won every time! I came close a few times, but she *always* won. She was a born swordswoman."

"*You* lost 3,000 fights?" Gaara questioned incredulously. Zoro seemed so strong and unbeatable!

"Yeah, well, I was an impulsive little shit. In one of my matches with her I grabbed as many bokutō as I could get in both of my hands and mouth. I thought that having the most swords guaranteed a win. She whacked me across the face using one bokutō, and I had to walk around with a black eye for a week for my stupidity."

It appeared that Zoro *would* in fact open up, when talking about swords, or maybe even this Kuina person.

Gaara was now curious. He hadn't missed how Zoro had referred to Kuina. Looking at the ground, he quietly asked, "What happened to her?"

Zabuza and Haku both saw what looked to be a small hint of remorse cross Zoro's features before he shoved it aside and replied, "There was an accident, and she died."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Zoro-san." Haku said genuinely.

Zoro shrugged, now back to his usual, scowling self. "Why? You didn't do anything."

Haku frowned, thinking over Zoro's response. The younger teen wasn't insulted; he was just coming to a closer understanding of Zoro's character. He was blunt and honest, and had a practical way of viewing the world. He figured that Zoro didn't see why he should be involved in a war that he didn't think had anything to do with him; he didn't see why Haku would be apologetic over the death of his friend – in Zoro's thinking, apologizing for such a thing must mean someone is at fault. When he saw someone was in trouble, the evident solution was to do something about it – Kimimaro's situation was an obvious example. Seeing how Naruto and Gaara were with Zoro, Haku wondered what exactly Zoro had saved them from.

Yes, Zoro was certainly an interesting man indeed.

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They had stopped for a quick lunch and a short break, so Naruto and Gaara were currently sitting on either side of Haku, while he weaved together wild flowers to make flower crowns. Naruto had seen the girls back in Konoha do this, and he had never been allowed to get close enough to see how they made the necklaces and crowns out of the various wild flowers and weeds that grew around the village. He didn't question why or how someone like Haku would know how to do such a thing; the boy was far more fascinated simply by watching Haku weave the stems together.

Gaara had never seen something like this done. The only plants in Suna were cacti and medicinal herbs. Doing things like this would have been seen as a waste of time and resources. In fact, Gaara couldn't understand why people would pull up the plants and make flower crowns anyway. Didn't that kill the plants? But Naruto seemed to be enjoying himself and Haku seemed to be enjoying showing them how to make them.

Kimimaro simply sat back and observed, content in laying back in the cool grass and staring up at the perpetually cloudy sky.

"Alright, you two try." Haku said as he handed flowers over to the younger boys.

Naruto stuck his tongue out in intense concentration and began to

weave the stems together. Haku couldn't help but smile in amusement.

"You're just weaving flowers, Naruto – not planning an invasion."

"I wanna get it right, 'ttebayo..." Naruto muttered, still focused as ever.

Gaara quietly sat and weaved his flowers together, finding it quite relaxing. Gaara finished weaving his crown before getting up and heading towards Zabuza and Zoro who were talking several feet away.

Zabuza had learned that the one way to get Zoro to open up about some aspects of himself was to ask about swords. It seemed that talking about swords was a gateway for conversation.

"Wado Ichimonji, huh?" Zabuza cocked an invisible eyebrow at the name of Zoro's most precious sword. "Ironically named for someone like you, isn't it?"

"Oi!" Zoro gripped Wado Ichimonji and nearly drew it out of its sheath. "I *don't* get lost if that's what you're implying! With the size of that sword, you're probably compensating for something, you naked-eyebrows-Tape-Face!"

That struck a nerve with Zabuza. He had heard the jokes before, sure, but not from some kid who was a good five or six years his younger. "I'm not compensating for anything, you directionless brat!"

Zabuza paused, and took in a breath and counted backwards from 100. There was that odd feeling again – Zoro had done or said something that made Zabuza feel compelled to go along with his crazy antics. Before either of them could say anything else, Gaara approached carrying a flower crown. He smiled shyly as he presented it to Zoro.

"Look what Haku showed me how to make!" Gaara looked proud as he held it out for Zoro to take. "You put it on your head."

It took two seconds for Zoro to realize that Gaara wasn't telling him its purpose; he was telling him what to do with it. If it had been anyone else, Zoro probably would have told the kid to go away and pester someone else. But looking down at Gaara with that expression and those green eyes... dammit. He'd have to be a monster to say 'no'.

So, sucking up any pride he had Zoro leaned forward so Gaara could place the crown on his head. Gaara beamed up at Zoro, causing that

constricting-yet-not-unpleasant feeling to fill in his chest.

"Thanks...Gaara."

"Uh-huh." Gaara turned on his heel, and joined the others once again.

Zabuza smirked. "If you had your green hair out for the world to see, it would look like that thing sprouted out of your head naturally."

Zoro glared at something in the distance, light blush coloring his cheeks.

"...shut up."

Zabuza just laughed. It had felt like a long time since he had laughed like this.

When Gaara returned to Haku's side a few minutes later empty-handed, he looked pleased with himself.

The redhead picked up some more flowers and began weaving them again.

"No fair," Naruto pouted when he realized that Gaara was already working on another crown, while he was barely even halfway through his first.

"Now, now..." Haku was trying to think of a way to deter any argument between the boys. He hadn't seen them fight, and he didn't want them to start now.

Naruto looked like he was going to say something, but Kimimaro spoke up first. "I'm glad I'm here...and not in that cell. I've never seen anything like this, I never thought I would in my lifetime. I'm glad that I got to experience it with all of you."

"I'm glad as well," Haku agreed, but he frowned. "Surely you would have seen something like this at some point, right?"

A melancholic expression crossed Kimimaro's features. He shrugged. "I...I don't know. You see... I'm dying."

At those words, both Naruto and Gaara stopped and looked up at Kimimaro.

"What?! Why?!" Naruto demanded.

"We'll have to go to a healer." Gaara said. "My uncle said that when people are sick, they need to see a healer."

"It's not something a healer can help." Kimimaro smiled. "But thank you for suggesting it. It's just... the people in my clan are Kaguya in name only, even if they were born into it, while I possess the Kekkei Genkai. Except...it's killing me, little by little. Basically, my own body is turning on itself every time I use my abilities."

"You can't die." Gaara said suddenly, intently glaring at him. "You're my friend. It's not fair of you to do something like that."

Kimimaro stared at Gaara for a brief moment before laughing. He couldn't help it. The boy had spoken with such intensity and sincerity, glaring at him while he said those words, the young teen couldn't think of anything else to do but laugh. Once he had calmed down, he smiled at Gaara. "Thank you, for saying that Gaara."

Kimimaro didn't think that Gaara knew how wonderful a thing it was to hear such words from anyone. Someone had acknowledged his existence, and it *mattered* to them that his life was slowly being sapped away.

"Gaara..." Haku said gently. "Kimimaro-san can't help it if he's dying..."

"But..."

Haku put a hand on Gaara's shoulder and squeezed gently. "We can't control who comes and who goes in our lives, Gaara. All we can do is show the precious people who are with us now how much we care for them, whether that is through our words or our actions."

"We can ask Zoro-nii for help!" Naruto determined. Because if Zoro had helped him and Gaara, and had helped Kimimaro escape his prison, then he could also help stop his sickness. It was with this logic that Naruto shot to his feet and ran over to Zoro before anyone could stop him.

Naruto ran up to Zoro and grabbed his pant leg. "Zoro-nii!" At the urgency in his voice, both Zoro and Zabuza were on their feet. "You have to help Kimimaro!"

Both of them glanced over at the other three; Gaara was now pouting, Haku looked worried, and Kimimaro looked somewhat amused. Before either of them could ask, Naruto continued. "Kimimaro's dying! Can't

you do anything?"

"What? Dying?" Zoro looked to Kimimaro for explanation.

Kimimaro just smiled in a way that showed he accepted the fact. "My Kekkei Genkai is killing me. Basically, it's interfering with how my body grows and absorbs nutrients, and is slowly poisoning me every time I use it."

"Shit." Zabuza muttered. He had to feel for the kid. Inbreeding had a different effect on holders of Kekkei Genkai than that of civilians. While civilians could have up to three or four (maybe even five) generations before having children with each other stopped being an option, holders of Kekkei Genkai could have up to seven or eight – hell, even ten. But with trying to keep their bloodline alive and pure, it created diseases that ferociously attacked the following generations.

Marrying outside of the clan was often the only option.

Given the fact that the Kaguya Clan's Kekkei Genkai was virtually dead save Kimimaro, it was likely that either a grandparent or a parent was not a Kaguya themselves.

"Then find a doctor who can treat you." Zoro said simply. "Just don't use your Kekkei Genkai until then, unless it's really necessary."

"...A 'doctor'?" Zabuza asked in confusion. "What's a doctor?"

"Where would I find a doctor?" Kimimaro asked, equally confused.

"I mean a healer." Zoro said quickly, brushing off the confused expressions being sent his way. "Besides, how would I know? I'm not from here." Zoro sighed, and his eyes looked back the way they had come. "Let's get going. I'm tired of sitting around."

Everyone was ready to leave within ten minutes, and they continued on their way. Zabuza didn't like the feeling nagging at the back of his mind that the reason Zoro didn't want to stop for very long was because someone was after him, and Zabuza didn't want to think of who that might be.

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Their odd group had been walking in companionable silence for a few hours now. The fog around them was steadily growing thicker, but it wasn't the strange fog that Zabuza had spoken of. If he remembered

correctly, they were probably a few miles away from the port town where they could then sail off to find whatever that mysterious fog hid. The idea was crazy, but Zabuza was a man of his word. There was no worry about getting lost if Zoro was able to guide them.

They had to walk through a valley of sorts to reach the town, and trees with thick roots towered over them on both sides. Although they weren't as tall as the trees in Kawa, the tops of the trees here disappeared into the fog above them; probably making the trees seem taller than they actually were.

"We should be careful," Zabuza said. "Thieves like to hang out around here and attack unsuspecting travelers."

Well...considering that Zabuza and Zoro were there, they *should* be left alone. But that didn't mean they'd drop their guard just because a few fools thought that they could take on an elite Shinobi.

"Let 'em come." Zoro smirked at the idea of a fight. "Besides, these two need the practice."

Zabuza resisted the urge of pinching the bridge of his nose. He very nearly found himself arguing that fighting wouldn't be a good idea – they needed to avoid it. Fortunately, Haku stepped up, and he was far calmer than Zabuza would have been.

"Zoro-san, avoiding a fight is the best thing for us right now. We don't want to draw any attention."

"Humph."

They walked through the valley in silence when Zabuza jerked in realization. The fog had become extremely thick. But Zoro kept walking, not really caring or noticing that the fog was there.

Zoro's brow furrowed, as the feeling of being watched slowly started to rise. He stopped walking, and turned just as the sound of a twig being snapped came from somewhere behind them. The sound echoed around them, making it difficult to pinpoint a location.

Someone had stepped on a tree branch, and the sound was far too heavy for it to have been an animal. Zabuza's hand slowly gripped his sword, waiting for an attack. Zoro drew his sword, and Naruto followed suit. Gaara's expression turned impassive, and he uncorked his sand.

"Well, well, well..." a man's voice sounded from somewhere within the fog. From the way he spoke, he was moving while he was talking. "If it isn't Momochi Zabuza...who'd thought we'd run into you here?"

Chapter End Notes

:About Freedom:

"Better to die fighting for freedom than be a prisoner all the days of your life" – Bob Marley

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"Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves."
– Abraham Lincoln

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Why was Zabuza more susceptible to Zoro's "Pace" than either Itachi and Shisui? Well, they sort of got caught in it a tiny bit, and not only do they keep each other sane, they're Uchiha; they're taught to hold stuff in more.

Or maybe it's because Zabuza is still reeling from his loss to the Third Mizukage, making him more likely to be effected by the boys' Pace.

Or probably (and the most likely explanation) Zabuza is simply OOC because I've never written for him before...and there are other awesome stories on this site in which he's been a main character and I've been partially inspired by them.

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Timelines are here! This handy-dandy lil' chart helps me keep track of all the things. For now, this only covers the major events going on within the Elemental Nations, along with showing some of the characters' ages.

Because there has constantly been conflict within the country, Kirigakure has in the past gone decades without have a Kage, which has contributed to why the country is doing so poorly. They have also been unable to agree as to who should be an intermediate, thus continuing the problem.

Third and current Mizukage, also Yagura's father. Since he was

never named in canon, from now on he will be known as Arashi.

Timeline(s) for this story:

210 years ago: The village of Kirikagure is officially established. First Mizukage, Gengetsu Hozuki was elected as leader.

185 years ago: The First Mizukage dies in the conflict with Iwa, and the Kūhaku disappear. The following years are filled with years of inner conflict, as no one can agree on who should be Mizukage, or how they should lead the country. The disaster with Iwa and the disappearance of the Kūhaku don't help matters.

93 years ago: The Second Mizukage, Byakuren is eventually elected. While various inner conflicts continue, Kirigakure is eventually recognized for its strength and the threat that it poses.

27 years ago: The Second Mizukage dies.

24.5 years ago: Kakashi is born.

22 years ago: Zabuza is born.

20 years ago: Sakumo commits seppuku, Koshiro defects from Konoha. (Kakashi is 4-5 at the time).

17 years ago: Zoro is born.

16 years ago: Zabuza slaughters the Kirigakure academy students, Shisui is born

15 years ago: The Third Mizukage, Arashi is elected. He has great plans for leading Kirigakure, Itachi is born.

14 years ago: Kimimaro is born.

13 years ago: Haku is born.

9 years ago: The "threat" that Kekkei Genkai wielders pose begins.

8.5 years ago: Obito dies during a mission, Kakashi gets his eye.

8 years ago: Mei's plans for usurping the Mizukage begins, Naruto is born, Minato and Kushina die.

7 years ago: Haku kills his father and numerous villagers in self-defense.

6.5 years ago: Rin dies during a mission.

6 years ago: Zabuza finds and takes in Haku.

4 years ago: Yagura is born.

1.3 years ago: Zoro arrives in Konoha

Roronoa Zoro: the Mysterious Wandering Nobody from Nowhere

Chapter Summary

The ragtag group run into former allies of Zabuza, who are loyal to the Third Mizukage's cause. Unfortunately, they aren't the type to sit around and have a friendly chat. When events lead Naruto into revealing exactly what he is, Zoro is unwilling to let the boy become a weapon and he reveals something about himself along with a secret that has been hidden from the Elemental Nations for years. Annoying as it is, Zabuza is a man of his word, and he and Haku lead Zoro and the others to the area with the cursed fog. Many more secrets are about to come to light...

Chapter Notes

This chapter, stuff goes down, the plot thickens, and questions are answered, while more questions arise. Hooray. I must thank everyone again for the comments and kudos. All you lovelies are as sweet as pie <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

"Well, well, well..." a man's voice sounded from somewhere within the fog. From the way he spoke, he was moving while he was talking. "If it isn't Momochi Zabuza...who'd thought we'd run into you here?"

Zoro's eyes easily caught the figures surrounding them, three in total. Right now, he couldn't distinguish their features, so they just looked like Human-shaped blobs. Judging from the way they were moving, they were preparing for some sort of attack, and were acting as if they couldn't be seen... Ah...there must be that hidden Mist Jutsu up, so that's why they were so fuzzy and acting like idiots who thought they couldn't be seen.

Zoro felt Gaara and Naruto cling to him even tighter, and he heard Gaara release a low, threatening growl.

"Taizo..." Zabuza drawled, now drawing his sword. "What are *you* doing here?"

"We were just passing by," Taizo answered, and Zabuza was sure he could hear an annoying smile somewhere in his voice. "And we just so

happened to catch a glimpse of your little party here."

Zoro flinched when he felt something brush passed him before disappearing. It was like being blindfolded in a room yet knowing someone else was there because he could hear them breathing, as they subtly ran delicate feathers over his skin, all while trying not to be noticed. Three more sensations prickled at his skin, and Zoro had to admit he found himself grinning as he turned to look.

Two more shapes were a distance away, trying not to be obvious and obviously thought that they couldn't be seen either. Again, they didn't seem to realize that Zoro could tell that they were there. One of the pair had oddly shaped forearms, and apparently they were getting into a position of attack.

"Prepare yourselves, brats." Zoro said, as he pulled away so could draw his swords. Zoro couldn't help as he released a chuckle. "There's six of these idiots, so there's enough to go around."

Taizo, on the other hand, narrowed his eyes. Who was this kid, and how did he know how many of them there were? Silent Killing? No... that somehow didn't seem right...was he a Sensor? But that didn't seem right either, because then wouldn't he have sensed them coming much earlier? Perhaps he had limited range, or perhaps he had to release a burst of chakra in order for his sensory ability to work.

The others with him were having pretty much the same thoughts, and were hesitant to rush in (as any smart Shinobi would and should be).

"Must be a sensory type," one of the women quietly muttered to her partner. The kid hadn't looked like much, and he had two little brats clinging to him. How unfortunate that this would be their graves. She grinned, sharp teeth glinting as she yelled out in an attempt to strike fear into the youngest brats. "I'm gonna enjoy ripping you all limb-from-limb!"

Zabuza growled in irritation. That was Isha.

"How could ya betray our Mizukage like ya did, Zabuza-san?" one of the other men asked in a pouting-tone, while also sounding as if he were mocking them.

"Koba, he's *insane*!" Zabuza answered, annoyed that these people were simply trying to taunt them. Well... unfortunately for them, he was the best at what he did. *Silent Killing* was a skill that he and Haku specialized in...as did Taizo and the others. But he didn't know about

Zoro; and those two brats very likely weren't. Perhaps Kimimaro was... But in the end, it all depended on which of them was faster and smarter. "He's weakening his own country, and for what?! Some ridiculous idea for a better world!"

Zabuza, Haku, and Kimimaro were preparing themselves for the imminent confrontation as they caught glimpses of figures swiftly moving through the mist. There was a noise, a glint of light on something metal, and sand suddenly surrounded Zabuza and Haku within seconds before receding. Both Kiri-Nin glanced down at Gaara in surprise who stood in the center of their tight circle, glaring out at the mist.

Haku decided he would thank Gaara later, and charged forward only a few feet into the mist, and ducked low under someone swinging their kunai at him. Over the years, he had perfected his *Hissatsu Hyoso* to the point that he could use it silently; controlling the size of the ice spikes, and the only indication was a sudden drop in temperature within a certain proximity of him.

His opponent was Goro, who hadn't known about Haku's true abilities, thinking that he was just another water user.

As Haku ducked backwards, he slid forward on his knees and twisted as he shoved numerous icy spikes through Goro's torso and neck. The man didn't even have time to gasp as he fell, wide-eyed.

One down.

Haku was back at Zabuza's side within seconds, and their opponents shifted uneasily. None of them had any idea that Haku was an ice user, and seeing how easily he had taken out one of their own, they were going to be even more cautious than before. Zabuza sent Haku a single glance, and the teen nodded wordlessly. They both split up to prepare for a team attack.

"*Enbima Yonezu...*" Zoro's voice rung clear, a wraith-like creature appeared above him, rising almost three or four feet into the air. Its cloak spread out, and a single red eye stared out at the enemy Shinobi. There were those of the enemy who swore that they could actually *hear* the steel in Zoro's blades as they rippled. Not being sure what the attack was, they prepared to defend or dodge, questioning what sort of Jutsu this was. "...*Oni Giri!*"

Zoro charged forward, slicing through two of his opponents. The power from the attack tore through the ground, leaving behind trails

of energy. One of them disappeared into nothing more than a puddle when the attack hit him. The other Shinobi didn't anticipate the power behind the attack, and he winced as numerous cuts appeared around his body even though he tried to block with a kunai.

Zoro was grinning maliciously at the man, who had to admit to his own bloodlust. Numerous sparks appeared with the friction between Zoro's swords and his opponent's kunai. His opponent, the one named Koba, winced as he strained against the swords. What *was* that attack just now? *Was* that even a Jutsu?

Koba sent chakra into his arms and legs so that he could shove himself away from the three-swords kid; widening the distance so that he could have a chance to think. Who was this kid anyway? Koba recalled hearing stories about some Kenjutsu-user wandering around Fire Country... he had an odd name...Zora, or something like that, but none of the stories had mentioned him being from Kiri.

Studying the teen, he only appeared to be around sixteen years of age, if not a little older. He had a marked Kiri hitai-ate, but that didn't make sense, because Koba didn't recognize him. He himself was nineteen, and would have certainly seen this guy before.

Just then, the other teen charged directly at him, and Koba quickly pulled out another kunai, and threw it at Zoro. But just before his eye would have been skewered, he simply faded out.

"What..." Koba gaped. Why did that seem familiar...? He barely blocked an attack that came from his right so unexpectedly, that Koba let out a surprised yell which sounded like a strange, spluttering noise. He shoved away his surprise and decided to pretend he hadn't made such an embarrassing noise, and called out,

"Suiton: Suidan no Jutsu!"

Zoro easily dodged to the side, preparing another attack. The way Zoro was moving, caused Koba more than just mild concern. The fog might as well not even be there, and Zoro was forcing him to be on the defense. Now, Zoro wasn't even bothering with calling out attacks or anything, simply pounding away at him.

"You're pretty boring," Zoro complained from around his sword. "Not even a swordsman...let's just get this over with."

"You want to get this over with?!" Koba demanded, insulted that Zoro would call him boring. This kid was acting like Koba wasn't even a

concern, much less a threat.

Who did this bastard think he was?! Koba fumed as he exchanged blows with Zoro, which left the muscles in his arms burning as he blocked the onslaught of attacks. The kid was clearly much stronger than he looked, and was probably holding back because he didn't think Koba was worth it.

That truly was an insult to Koba, so he decided to teach Zowa (or whatever his name was) a lesson in underestimating him. Once the younger teen was close enough, Koba took in a deep breath and called out, "*Suiton: Buraindobaburu no Jutsu!*"

He expelled numerous bubbles from his mouth at Zoro, which burst upon contact. Zoro balked as some sort of red powder filled his vision, and within seconds, his eyes were stinging and his vision blurred. Zoro sensed some sort of movement as something charged towards him, but because it felt like his face was on fire, he didn't have a chance to react. Koba slammed into him, Zoro just barely blocking. It was thanks to one of his swords that he hadn't gotten a kunai to the stomach, but the blow still knocked him back. Zoro rolled a few times before he was able to stand upright again.

By the time he had righted himself, Zoro's vision had returned. He smirked at Koba. It was at this point that if Zoro hadn't been wearing a hitai-ate, he would be tying his bandana around his head. "Now you've garnered my interest."

Zoro charged forward, and disappeared, actually appearing somewhere above Koba as he called out, "*Oni giri!*"

Koba's eyes widened when he realized it, and he only just dodged as his brain scrambled for answers as to the *where* and *how* of this mysterious teen who had appeared from nowhere. He shouted out a warning to his comrades – if he didn't survive this encounter, then at least they would be prepared.

"He's a *Kiri no Yuurei!* This guy's a fucking Kūhaku!"

Koba didn't get a chance to see how his companions were reacting to this impossible news, because right now his attention was on not dying to this kid – a *Kūhaku* – no wonder the kid didn't think much of him – and Koba prepared himself to attack or counterattack for whatever Zoro could have up his sleeve – plus, the strange techniques weren't helping things. How was he supposed to fight against them?!

As Zoro was charging towards Koba, his eyes widened upon seeing something behind the Kiri-Nin. Within seconds, Zoro disappeared into nothing. Koba internalized his panic, because he had no idea where his opponent who could disappear on a whim had gone.

"Where the hell are you?!"

But no answer came. Koba was left confused. Had the kid run? It hadn't looked like he was losing, so why? Koba searched his surroundings, wondering what was going on. A haunted scream filled the air, and Koba wondered if that was Sumie working her magic – but the pain-filled scream was off, somehow.

A dark energy filled the air.

"What...the...hell?"

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Zabuza blocked numerous shuriken with his sword before charging forward, twirling his sword in a single hand with ease. The fact that he didn't even need to use chakra to enhance his strength was an admirable feat. His opponent was Buri, a masculine woman who towered over even *him*, who stood a little over six feet tall. She specialized in various Water Jutsu that trapped her opponents, and she loved using metal rods to drive through her target's head or chest, whichever she was able to get to first.

Buri was incredibly lithe for someone her size, and she wore what were basically four gallons' worth of water in specially made bucket-like gauntlets around both of her forearms. She could shoot water bullets, have water rope or webbing at her disposal, plus getting slammed by one of those things in combination with her speed and strength resulted in numerous internal injuries that her target fortunately never had a chance to walk away from. Buri often liked crushing peoples' heads if she didn't have access to one of her rods.

So here Zabuza was, trying not to get hit by this woman's attacks. There was plenty of back-and-forth Water Jutsu between them, with Buri throwing her weight around as she fired water bullets and lashed out with water chains and shuriken. Zabuza spent time dodging, slashing through her attacks with his sword, and cursing his luck for getting an opponent who could easily attack from both long and close-range.

If Zabuza got close enough, he was sure that Buri would either crush

his chest with one of those stupid bucket gauntlets or maybe she'd drive a metal stake through his head or chest. Neither of those were pleasant ways to go; not that he was looking to die, or anything.

Talking to Buri would have been useless, because she and Taizo were fully committed to serving Arashi, and killed anyone who dared speak out against him without second thought. Zabuza had hoped that they would be some of the few to see reason and join their cause against the Third Mizukage's bloody regime, but considering where he was right now, Zabuza knew that small hope would never be the case.

So, if he wanted to survive this, he would have to fight smart. If there wasn't an opening, he would have to create one.

Buri charged towards him, and Zabuza dodged, slashing out. An irritating grating noise assaulted his hearing as his sword scraped against Buri's gauntlet as she blocked the attack with one arm. A large, almost two-foot metal rod was in her other hand. She expertly twirled it in her fingers before attempting to slam him in the side with it. Their positions made it too difficult for him to block with his sword or a kunai, so he was forced to pull back.

Buri easily gave chase, firing more water bullets as she went. The woman jumped into the air, spreading out her arms and called out, "*Suiton: Suidō-mō no Jutsu!*"

Zabuza cursed when water ropes shot out of her gauntlets and began to braid together into a large net. More water rose up around him, and Zabuza cursed his luck even more. Her chakra was tied to the water she had in her gauntlets, and now he was caught in her web like a fly.

"Just give up, Zabuza!" Buri shouted. "I'll make your traitor's death as painless as possible!"

Like hell he wouldn't fight.

Zabuza spun rapidly so that he could cut through any water that Buri was using for her net and he threw a few kunai at her while trying to think of a plan. She landed on the ground with a grunt and twisted so that her netting caught the kunai, and she grabbed a metal rod and drew her arm back and threw with a single, powerful thrust.

The rod skewered Zabuza's chest, and he stared wide-eyed at it before melting into a puddle. Buri glared, when she sensed something and spun around. Zabuza had to lean back to keep from getting clipped in the jaw, but he wasn't about to let this opportunity go to waste. He

ended up using Kubikiribōchō as a sort of shield while he ducked low and rapidly drove one kunai into Buri's thigh and used another to slash an unprotected portion of her arm before quickly widening the distance between them again.

Buri cursed Zabuza and then some, before charging once again, pulling her water net with her. She threw one of her rods at Zabuza, who swung his sword to prevent from being skewered just like his clone was. Another rod forced him to dodge, and with Buri trying to get in close, Zabuza was constantly on the move to not get something crushed.

Zabuza was dodging another attack when something caught his leg. Zabuza looked down and cursed. He had been caught in some of Buri's netting! But that was all Buri needed, and more water wrapped around Zabuza, pinning his arms to his side.

She smirked. "I'll give you a chance to beg, hell, even apologize before I kill you."

Zabuza gritted his teeth. He was caught! But he *would not* beg or apologize! "I stand by what I did, Buri!"

"Then *die*."

Buri charged forward.

Haku, who had been fighting Isha, while desperately keeping the corner of his eye on Zabuza's fight when and where he could, saw what had happened. Haku gasped, and charged towards Zabuza. He would not – no – *could not* let Zabuza-sama die! Haku appeared at the last minute in front of Buri's attack. The malicious smirk on her face slowly disappeared and Buri's eyes widened when she realized that the kid was going to take her attack. She couldn't stop herself! That would give Zabuza the perfect opening! Damn brat!

Zabuza silently cursed, because he knew that Haku was going to take a hit for him, and the kid wouldn't make it out of this valley.

Buri was just centimeters away from Haku's chest when something – or more like *someone* slammed into both Zabuza and Haku, and the world slid by them in blurry images. They rolled several feet before coming to a stop.

"What the hell are you *doing*?!" Zoro demanded, grabbing Haku's shirt. "You dumbass! What good are you to anyone dead?!"

Both Haku and Zabuza looked at Zoro in surprise at the rescue.

Haku narrowed his eyes. "My purpose is to protect Zabuza-sama's dream! If it costs me my life then so be it!"

"Oh, yeah?! What good's his dream if you aren't there with him to enjoy it?!"

Haku jerked, looking up at Zoro with wide eyes. He had always considered himself a tool for Zabuza-sama's use; his life meant nothing more. Zabuza could use him however he saw fit; killing anyone without question and watching his back.

"Haku, Shinobi are nothing more than tools."

It was what Zabuza-sama had always said. Haku would be both a sword and even a shield if need be – just like the situation with Buri. But the way Zabuza had said it... tools could be thrown away once their usefulness had ended. But they were people, and Zabuza had hated the fact that they could be so easily thrown away.

Haku had always believed that he would die so that Zabuza could continue to live and see out his dream. Haku was willing to die for that dream. But there was something else that Zabuza had said to him when they had been in one of their Revolutionist meetings:

"One of these days, we'll restore this country to its rightful place. You'll get to see it for what it's truly supposed to be."

Haku felt tears run down his cheeks. He was all Zabuza-sama had. He was about to say something else, when he thought that he heard Naruto screaming. The three all glanced worriedly over to where the others were.

"Well, isn't that touching?" Taizo mocked with a sneer, knowing that Sumie was taking care of the others, if that scream was any indication. "I'm gonna enjoy killing you while making your precious Zabuza-sama-"

Something vile suddenly filled the air, and a suffocating, hopeless dread washed over them as a pain-filled roar echoed through the valley. Taizo was cut off when some sort of glowing red object slammed into him just seconds later. Taizo screamed when his arm was ripped from its socket, and it was tossed a fair distance away.

Isha, Koba and Buri just stared in shock, the events not really

registering in their minds.

The situation would have been almost morbidly comical, if it hadn't been done by an eight-year-old blond boy.

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Just minutes earlier, Naruto, Gaara and Kimimaro had been standing in a tight circle of their own, while the others fought. Kimimaro easily brandished his bones as weapons, and he caught sight of someone rapidly coming towards him through the fog.

There was an attack aimed at his jugular, but Kimimaro easily dodged and swiped towards his opponent. There was the sound of torn fabric and ripping flesh, and Kimimaro's once stark-white weapon was colored a shade of crimson. A distance away, there was someone that was most certainly not one of his allies. He could tell by how the shape moved, they had been injured, but how badly, he couldn't be sure. But it was enough to hinder them; unless of course, they could work through the pain. Kimimaro was used to doing things like that, so he wouldn't risk it.

Pointing a hand with his fingers extended towards the enemy Shinobi. His finger bones rapidly shot out of his hand, forcing them to move.

The woman dodged to the side, glaring at the three irritably. These children were so troublesome. One of them had that weird sand technique, another was shooting bones at them, and the third, while he had yet to do anything, was holding onto his kusarigama in a white-knuckle grip.

Sumie frowned in mild annoyance, and ignored the wound on her leg. Since she couldn't get in close, she would have to resort to using other tricks. She analyzed the small, huddled group and had to smile at the blond, as she believed this boy to be the weakest of them. She had seen how these children had clung to that one teen, and she saw how much trouble he was giving them. Although she preferred shedding blood when and where she could, casting Genjutsu was a specialty of hers, and she was sure that a child's anguished screams would give anyone who cared for that child pause. It would distract them long enough for her allies to attack.

When Koba called out that his opponent of all things was a Kūhaku, she had to smile. Things were starting to get *very* interesting, and she hoped that she would find out later just where Zabuza had found a Kūhaku. But first, she had to take care of these brats.

"Hey, little boy..." she whispered, using the fog to her advantage. Sumie drew in as close as she dared, gaining the blond boy's attention. "Want to play a game with me?"

Naruto gasped as something penetrated his senses; a sickly sweet smell and the sound of humming echoed around him. The world around Naruto swirled, and he could do nothing as he watched his brothers and friends die horrible, bloody deaths. They were ripped apart by the images in the mist, and Naruto could do nothing but stand by and watch.

Naruto screamed for them, crying and begging for it not to be so. His mind should have been able to tell that none of this was real, but the logical part of him was drowned out in his panic, grief, and most of all: pure, unadulterated fury at the woman who had killed his family.

Kyuubi of course, could easily see through the illusion. But he decided not to inform Naruto of that fact, because he was tired of being stuck in this prison. He was also annoyed at that foolish swordsman; and he would show that boy *exactly* what he thought could be contained and controlled. The teen called him a sword? Then Kyuubi would reveal the sharpness of his blade! The Sand-brat's little temper tantrum would be *nothing* compared to this!

Naruto screamed, grabbing at his head as he collapsed to his knees, sobbing.

"Naruto?" Gaara asked slowly, wondering why his brother was suddenly screaming. Something in Gaara's stomach jolted as a strange, red substance encased Naruto.

Sumie wasn't sure what was going on, because something about this entire situation was off. This kid wasn't acting like the usual victim of her Genjutsu, so she –

Something ripped through her, and Sumie collapsed to the ground. The blond boy was standing over her; his hair a wild mess and glowering red eyes, and a snarl on his face as red chakra surrounded him. Sumie took in a shaky gasp that resulted in a violent coughing fit. This boy was a *Jinchuuriki*! She had to warn the others!

"Eh...he..." Sumie couldn't move and couldn't talk. She coughed a few times, causing blood to cover her front and she gurgled, choking on her own blood.

"RRAAAWWWRRRRR!"

The scream was so loud, but it barely even registered in Sumie's mind as the world around her turned hazy. She watched as the blond charged Taizo, unable to do anything as the images around her doubled and slowly, everything turned to black and she breathed her last.

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"Naruto?" Zoro's eyes widened and his breath hitched. That dark energy he had felt all those months before... *this* was what all those people had been afraid of. Or at least, a very tame version of it.

Naruto was covered in red chakra, and his eyes were now red with slit pupils. Naruto now sported pronounced fangs and claws, and the whisker marks on his face were even more noticeable than before. Naruto made a pseudo-scream-growl as he ripped out Taizo's throat.

"RRAAAAAAAAWWWWWW!"

"Naruto!" Zoro called out.

Now, things registered for Isha, Koba and Buri, who were now angry that this kid had killed their teammates.

Naruto easily dodged each of their attacks, snarling as he did so. He seemed to be revealing in the blood lust, and Koba stood no chance as a clawed hand ripped through his gut.

Buri charged forward and Isha threw a kunai at him which turned out to be completely useless as the red chakra surrounding Naruto seemed to behave as if it had a mind of its own and grabbed the kunai out of the air and tossed it aside. The kunai went flying off towards Gaara, who very fortunately had his shield to protect him.

Buri did no better as when she tried to crush the boy with one of her gauntlets, he easily grabbed it in his palm. The red chakra wrapped around her arm, and Buri couldn't pull away. She screamed as her arm was crushed. Naruto threw Buri into Isha when the other woman charged forward, and successfully knocked the wind out of her.

It was so surreal and terrifying watching the morbid scene unfold, that Zabuza, Haku, Kimimaro and Zoro found themselves unable to move.

Buri still tried to fight back, desperately trying to hold Naruto off with one arm, but Naruto was still able to reach her. She barely got a chance to scream as her head was crushed. Isha was trapped under

Buri's large form, and couldn't move. She had never thought that she would be so afraid of death, but when red eyes with slight pupils peered at her from around the body of her dead companion, she desperately wished to be anywhere else but here. What was going to happen to her?

Gaara felt sick to his stomach, a part of him honestly wanted to challenge Naruto and rip him apart. Gaara squeezed his eyes shut, and covered his ears, trying to block out the feeling.

"Naruto, stop!" Zoro finally yelled in near-desperation, charging after the boy.

The woman only gave out a gurgling scream as Naruto ripped into her. Naruto slowly turned, eyeing Zoro like a starved, rabid animal would a piece of meat.

"RrrrraaaawwwWWWWW!"

Internally, the Kyuubi was ecstatic. ***"Do you see this brat for what he is, Roronoa Zoro? What I make him to be? This is just a preview of our power!"***

"Naruto..." Zoro was much calmer now. "You can stop now. It's over."

Naruto simply crouched on all fours and slowly turned to face the teen, bloody drool dripping down his chin. Naruto charged forward, claws extended.

"I'll make you fear me, as all Humans rightly should!" the Kyuubi bellowed from within his prison. ***"Did you really think that something like me can be contained?!"***

Zoro pulled Wado Ichimonji out of his haramaki, and spun in a way so that he could build up momentum and he slammed the sheath into Naruto's stomach. Naruto gasped as the wind was knocked from his lungs, and he crumpled to the ground. Zoro knelt down beside him, and being unsure of what else to do, took Naruto into his arms and held him close.

"You can stop now, Naruto...it's alright..."

Was that the right thing to say? Zoro wasn't sure. Is this what he was supposed to do? Would it even work?

"Z-Zoro-n-nii..." Naruto sniffled. "I-I thought that ev-everyone was-

was..." Naruto started bawling, and Zoro felt awkward yet relieved as he tried to comfort the kid. He quickly turned around so that Naruto couldn't see what was left of the woman's corpse. Or any of the corpses, for that matter.

Gaara was next to them in that moment. He knelt down and said quietly, "Naruto, your monster isn't in control anymore..."

Zabuza and Haku were both standing now, looking on, and Kimimaro was still trying to process what he had just seen. The Kaguya were violent, yes, but...not like *that*.

"He's a Jinchuuriki..." Zabuza stated, looking down at Zoro and the two boys. In all honesty, Zabuza would not deny in that moment, he was thinking that if they had more than one Jinchuuriki (and hell, even a Kūhaku) in their ranks during their second attempt at a coup d'état, then their chances of winning would increase tenfold. Especially considering what he had just witnessed.

Zoro visibly tensed, and muttered, "Naruto, Gaara, get behind me."

Zoro took hold of Wado Ichimonji, and glared at Zabuza and Haku as he slowly stood up, while Kimimaro looked on, uncertain. He wasn't sure whose side he should take here; both of these people he considered friends. He was wondering if begging them not to fight would work.

"These two are just kids; they aren't fighting in your war." Zoro stated firmly. He stood in a way that showed he would draw his swords without a second thought.

Haku was torn, and he didn't know what he should do. Should he protect Zabuza, and force the man to live on without the only family he had left; or try to reason with Zoro and Zabuza, so that all of them walked out of here alive? He did owe Zoro his life, yet...he owed Zabuza so much more... but...what should he do?

Zabuza glared daggers at Zoro. His loss to the Mizukage, the need to heal and recruit, Zoro's stubbornness and the stress of having to deal with all the antics from the day before finally all accumulated.

"Dammit, Roronoa! Do you *think* I enjoy sending children off to war?! I was barely *nine* years old when I got my first taste of bloodshed, and Haku was four years old when his life fell apart! This is *our* reality, meanwhile, you're traipsing through Kiri with a fucking Jinchuuriki, something that could help us win! I'm not saying we need to fight the

Mizukage right now, but-"

"They aren't fighting in your war! I don't care if you wait five years or ten, this war has nothing to do with them." Zoro stood his ground.

"They aren't Shinobi or whatever of Kiri!"

"You are a *Kūhaku*! Don't you have any pride, whatsoever?" Zabuza demanded, his frustration showing.

"I don't see how being a *Kūhaku* has anything to do with this!"

"It has *everything* to do with *you*!" Zabuza pointed at Zoro. "The First Mizukage betrayed *your* clan, and now the Third's hunting people with Kekkei Genkai down! Why don't you want to avenge your clansmen, if not your countrymen?!"

Zoro couldn't take it anymore. He ran his hand over his hitai-ate, meaning to run his hand through his hair. Instead, Zoro caused the hitai-ate to go crooked, so he took it off so he could successfully run his hand through his hair now.

"I'm not even *from* here!"

"So that's it then, is it? Your loyalty is to what, Konoha? Suna?" Zabuza glared as he added with a certain amount of malice, "*Iwa?*"

Zoro slapped his forehead in an exasperated manner. "*No!* I mean – I'm *not* from the Elemental Nations *at all*."

Zabuza just stared, because that wasn't an answer that he had been expecting. What sort of bullshit was this?

"What do you mean?"

Zoro sighed heavily as he plopped back down on the ground, expression that of exhaustion. He motioned with a hand, "I'm from *out there*."

Looking at Zoro with exasperation, Zabuza just about growled, "Out *where?*"

The teen looked up at Zabuza and said, "There's some kind of..." he thought of how to describe it, but Zoro was never one who was good at describing things, "...powerful Genjutsu pillar forest thing that surrounds the entire Elemental Nations. I'm from an island in East Blue, called Crescent Island, and I grew up in Shimotsuki Village."

"..." Zabuza gave Zoro an incredulous look. "That is absolutely ridiculous. If you don't-"

"Where do you think all the Kūhaku disappeared to, huh?" Zoro challenged. "Look, I didn't even know about the Elemental Nations or the Kūhaku until I was ten. Even then, they're not hanging around Crescent Island. My Sensei, the man who raised me, was a former Shinobi of Konoha, named Koshiro."

Zabuza's eyes widened. Every Shinobi Kenjutsu user worth their salt at least knew of Koshiro in some capacity – whether it had been by personal experience, or simply through word-of-mouth. "Koshiro? Are you serious? He's been..."

Zabuza trailed off, because no-one really *knew* what had become of Koshiro. He was yet another mystery that no-one really knew how to solve. There had been claims that he had been spotted in such-and-such country to people saying that they had killed him. Since they didn't have a body or some other proof to back up their outrageous claims, everyone either ignored them – or killed them, for being a nuisance. Others claimed that the mist had swallowed him up.

"You could be lying about Koshiro," Zabuza stated, and he would be the first to admit how weak that argument sounded.

"Do you know what he looks like?"

"Yes, I do." Zabuza answered. He had seen a picture of Koshiro in one of the Bingo Books a few years before.

"Koshiro-sensei has glasses and long hair. He's usually friendly, but can get downright scary if he wants to, so I learned not to get on his bad side years ago." Zoro replied. "He defected from Konoha years ago and found his way out of the Genjutsu forest thing."

"How?"

"Long story..."

Zabuza scowled at that reply.

"He taught me his techniques..." Zoro shrugged. "Besides, how do you explain my *not* Jutsu? My appearing out of nowhere?" he then added, motioning to his hair, "What about the way I look?"

"Wait...Koshiro taught you that weird move with that hooded

creature?" Haku couldn't help but speak up now. Zabuza had told him about Koshiro at some point, and how it was a shame that he had essentially disappeared. "But how...? That wasn't a Jutsu, was it?"

"No, well...Koshiro-sensei simply pointed me in the direction for learning that stuff..."

Not really being in the mood to be subject to more of Zoro's horrible explanation skills, Zabuza said, "Fine...say I believe you about this whole ridiculous Genjutsu forest. Why hasn't anyone ever said anything? Why haven't they noticed it?"

"Because they don't know?" Zoro shrugged again. "People naturally tend to avoid it. But your fishermen have all those stories involving ships completely disappearing at sea, never to be seen again. That's because they got caught in the forest."

"Really, those stories are true?!" Gaara finally spoke up, much louder than he intended. He made an "eep!" noise when everyone's eyes fell on him.

"Another thing... haven't you *ever* asked yourself what's *beyond* the Elemental Nations' borders?"

"It's the end of the world," Kimimaro answered softly. "That's what the legends say, anyway..."

Numerous stories had been told to stay away from the mysterious borders that surrounded the Elemental Nations. 'No good could come from it' was always the reason stated. Either that or it was simply dangerous. Most often, it was said that those borders consisted of nothing but the end of the world; it was a cliff that overlooked an empty black void that was surrounded by an endless fog. But there was something about those borders that caused people to avoid them without question. None of the Kiri-Nin had ever even considered it – not until it was pointed out to them that they were there.

A few years ago, Zabuza was on a mission where he had to travel close to the fog-covered border, yet he had avoided it like it was second-nature, same as breathing. He had never thought back to that moment until now; *why* had he avoided the border? It hadn't been just because of the stories; it just felt like that was what he was *supposed* to do. Like logic said that jumping off a cliff without any idea of how you were going to land alive and intact was a bad idea. Avoiding those borders had been along the lines of that same reasoning.

"I can't believe I'm about to say this too..." Zoro muttered, and he frowned even more. "There's a reason why we can't stay in the Elemental Nations for much longer..." Zoro glared at the ground as he casually added, "Naruto here's from Konoha, and I've been asked to look after him, because he can't be in Konoha right now, but the problem's we very likely got some sort of Sannin guy on our tail-"

"Wait, did you say '*Sannin*'?" Zabuza interrupted.

Zoro silently nodded.

"DAMMIT RORONOA!" Zabuza couldn't help but yell. "Why couldn't you have said something about that *earlier*?!"

"Hey, *you* followed *me*. I *said* I was in a hurry."

Zabuza slapped his own forehead this time, clearly in frustration. The way Zoro had been acting was now making a disturbing amount of sense. Orochimaru was obviously out; Tsunade had simply left Konoha behind; and so that only left Jiraiya, the Toad Sage who would more than likely be a nightmare to go up against.

The green-haired teen ignored Zabuza's internal rant about the situation.

"You obviously don't believe me about that whole outside world, thing..." Zoro said, as he pulled out a folded piece of paper, and proceeded to unfold it as he handed it to Zabuza. Zabuza took the paper incredulously; and stared down at what turned out to be a map that looked to be a few years old and worn from however many years of use and exposure to the elements. He couldn't read some of the words, and he only recognized various letters like "A", "B" and "S". It was an intricately made map, with numerous oddly-shaped islands with names that were honestly completely nonsensical to him.

Written in gentle scrawl next to a small circle by an island was '**access point**'.

"This is a map of East Blue." Zoro said, as he observed Zabuza studying the map.

It was way too intricate and was honestly way too much trouble to go through if someone was going to create such an elaborate lie.

"Say I believe you." Zabuza said, as he continued looking at the strange map. "What then?"

Zoro just shrugged. "You can go if you want, I just came here to find out about the Kūhaku's techniques. You could also stick around. I don't really care what you do..." Zoro glanced down at the two boys clinging to him. He directed his gaze to Kimimaro. "Look, the thing is... the doctors - the healers, *out there* aren't gonna have any idea what to do with your illness. Kekkei Genkai users *aren't* a thing outside of the Elemental Nations." Considering himself, Zoro added, "They're few and far between."

Zoro wasn't going to force Kimimaro to choose between them. "If you're gonna go with anyone, you should go with Tape-Face here." Zabuza chose not to act indignantly to the nickname in light of the information Zoro had revealed. "He's your best chance at getting a doctor; and he's not on some sort of time constraint. If he knows the future Mizukage, then she's gotta know people, right?"

Kimimaro just nodded, his expression saddened. While he was glad that he didn't have to choose between the two; he didn't want to split from Zoro and his brothers just yet. Especially not when he had just learned of this outlandish information!

Zabuza sighed heavily, considering the situation. While he was admittedly annoyed, it wasn't every day that you heard a story like this. As crazy as it sounded, it made *sense*. Plus, Zoro's casual statement of him knowing the future Mizukage struck a chord with him. Well... Zabuza was a man of his word... dammit.

"Dammit, Roronoa..." Zabuza scratched the back of his head. "I said I would show you where that weird fog is, so we should get going."

"You're sure?" Zoro asked, looking somewhat surprised. He didn't think that Zabuza would actually stick around knowing what he did. "You don't have to..."

Zabuza handed the weird map back to Zoro, and they were on their way again. "I'm a man of my word; even as a former Shinobi of Kirigakure. Besides, if I'm not here, you'll probably end up in Kumo."

Zoro scowled. "I don't get lost!"

Zoro took a moment to help Naruto get cleaned up, while the others pilfered the bodies for supplies. Haku was the only to say a prayer for the deceased. Gaara simply took care of the bodies with his sand, which was honestly a relief for both Zabuza and Haku. It would prevent people from asking questions long enough for them to realize that six Kiri-Nin were dead.

Zabuza's reasoning for sticking with Zoro was this: he now wanted to see what exactly the Kūhaku had been hiding, but mostly for curiosity's sake. Plus, this was a chance to not only learn more about the Kūhaku, but also this Outside world that Zoro had come from.

That was when Zoro finally opened up to them, telling the others some about his childhood...

Koshiro hadn't known much about the Kūhaku; having briefly read something that had been gathering dust within Konoha's archives due to boredom one day. He also only had the numerous ghost stories that revolved around the *Kiri no Yuurei*, and even upon witnessing what Zoro could do at a young age, the Kūhaku honestly weren't even the first thing Koshiro would have considered. He had actually thought that Zoro had eaten something called a Devil Fruit at first.

"Devil Fruit?" Gaara asked, momentarily interrupting Zoro's explanation. "What's that?"

"Eh...it's some sort of rare fruit that gives the one who eats it some kind of ability – but at the cost of not being able to swim..." Zoro shrugged. "I've never seen one or seen anyone with Devil Fruit powers."

That then left the question of why Devil Fruits were never seen in the Elemental Nations. Of course, Zoro had no idea and could offer no explanation.

Zoro told them how Koshiro had no idea how Zoro's abilities worked or even how to train them. With Zoro's tendency to wander and him not even realizing until well after the fact... he had offered up Zoro the option of traveling to the Elemental Nations to try and find whatever clues he could about a long-lost Clan. Upon hearing about the Elemental Nations, Zoro had jumped at the chance to get stronger and carry out his dream.

Part of the reason he had discouraged Zoro of telling people what he was had to do with the fact of the Kūhaku's mysterious disappearance. While Koshiro had told him some of the ghost stories, they answered nothing and were honestly ridiculous sounding. But there were the stories involving why and how they had disappeared (often in bloody messes that involved unsolved murders, slaughtered villages, and battlefields). He had been worried what someone would do to a Kūhaku; especially one that was an outsider.

An unknown and rare Kekkei Genkai would put a target on Zoro's

back, and part of Koshiro's mistrust very likely also stemmed from his Shinobi days.

"Keep this to yourself and tell no-one."

Well, Zoro had only told one other person; and as for the others – Naruto, Gaara, and Kimimaro were there to witness it, and Zabuza and Haku had known enough to guess correctly.

So Zoro had trained intensely before making his way to what he could only describe as a "gateway" and since he was terrible at telling stories and giving details, his companions didn't get anything else beyond that, much to Zabuza's frustration.

Zoro *had* been in Kiri for a while before he had gotten lost in the desert – the story was cut short for a moment as Zabuza demanded,

"How the hell did you go from Kiri to the fucking desert?!"

"Kiri *moved*, dammit!" Zoro defended himself.

"Entire countries *don't* move, at least not like that!" Zabuza reigned in his frustration, already figuring out that arguing with Zoro was akin to arguing with a brick wall that was just sentient enough to speak.

Zoro snorted. "Whatever,"

From the desert, Zoro found his way to Konoha, since he had to go there anyway for something. What it was, Zoro wouldn't say, as it was personal.

But unfortunately, Zoro wandered all over the desert, the Land of Fire, and even had a brief stint in Iwa before he finally made his way back to Konoha and had met Naruto a few months ago. Chances were, Haku reasoned, Zoro probably wouldn't even be in Kiri right now if it weren't for his younger brothers.

While Zabuza wasn't necessarily a superstitious man, he wondered if the fates had somehow played a part in Zoro's wanderings. That was the only thing that made sense.

But Zabuza pushed his musings aside as Zoro was telling them about growing up in a dojo – Kuina was a subject that they found to be both something that would cause Zoro to talk about *before* whatever had killed her happened, or Zoro would change the subject completely. But what was clear was the fact that Zoro was carrying her spirit and

dreams with Wado Ichimonji.

The conversation stopped when they reached a small fishing village. The village consisted of roughly sixteen huts, but from the looks of them, well over half of those were storage houses and smoke huts. The huts were simply slapped together using bits and pieces of metal and wood for any repairs and the residents called it a day. In all honesty, the group felt that if any of them so much as breathed too hard in the direction of the huts, they'd topple over.

At the docks, they found a nearly toothless old man working. He eyed them curiously and then suspiciously as he took in the sight of Zabuza and Zoro's hitai-ate. He seemed even more suspicious at seeing the younger boys with them.

In a gravelly voice that each of them had to strain to understand, he asked, "Whaddya wan?"

It didn't help that his lack of teeth made things considerably more difficult.

Zabuza was not one for formalities, so once he was sure he knew what the man was asking, he replied, "We need a boat," he motioned to one of the ones on the shore. "Any of these will do."

The man glanced from Zabuza to the boats, then out to the ocean. He sighed and muttered under his breath then he waved a gnarled hand out towards the water. "'Og's 'ollin' in."

"...Fog?" Haku hopefully clarified.

The man nodded, and now appeared to be looking at them as if they were idiots. "'On' wadda be gon' ou'ere."

It took a few moments for them to decipher that one to mean, 'don't want to be going out there.'

Zoro glared, temper finally flaring up. "Just give us a boat, old man!"

Haku actually held up a placating hand, and being the most diplomatic of them then said, "How about money?"

He pulled out a few ryo, and after eyeing the money for a brief moment or two, the old man took the money and led them to a small boat that could accommodate them all. He then stalked off before anyone could thank him (not that any of them really wanted to –

except Haku who offered a quick 'thanks' that most likely went unheard) and they were pretty sure they heard him muttering something along the lines of: "'Upid 'oolfs, 'unnin' tadare deasths,"

"...Did he just call us stupid fools?" Kimimaro asked as he helped shove the boat in the water.

"Considering that we just bought a boat so we could sail off when the fog's rolling in, when everyone says not to, then yes, we're stupid fools." Zabuza replied as he climbed in.

"Since you know where we're going, you get to row." Zoro said to Zabuza before he could say another word. "So while we're waiting, I'm gonna take a nap."

"What-" Zabuza narrowed his eyes into a glare as Zoro settled down in the boat with his fingers laced behind his head.

"LIKE HELL!" Zabuza would have used one of his Water Jutsu if it didn't risk sinking the boat or putting everyone else in danger. "I'm not going to risk getting lost in the fog for a month or so just because you want to doze!"

"...Fine." Zoro glowered.

As they sailed forward, the fog started becoming increasingly thick. It was disconcerting, because there was no real way to tell where they were going, or how long they had been out here.

"Well?" Zabuza asked at one point when he was finally tired of simply drifting.

"Well' what?" Zoro asked, looking entirely bored.

"Navigate, or something!" Zabuza pressed. He wouldn't panic, but if this crazy idea turned out to be a dud, he'd be at fault for it being his idea, and he'd have to take out his frustration on Zoro for not doing the thing that Kūhaku were supposed to be able to do.

Zoro shrugged lopsidedly as he tried not to wake up Naruto who was asleep next to him, ignoring the drool that was spilling out of the boy's mouth and onto his shirt. "That way's water, and that way's water too... the sky's just one big cloud, so I can't tell which cloud to..." Zoro trailed off as he stared at something to his left – Zabuza's right.

"Roronoa?"

Zoro had an odd, unfocused yet intent look on his face as if he were seeing something that only he could see. Zoro pointed in the direction he was looking. "Go that way."

Zabuza didn't question it, mostly because he didn't want to be out here for much longer, and because of how Zoro was acting.

Zabuza continued to row, and every now and then Zoro would say, "go left," or "go right" all while he had that dazed, yet focused look on his face.

However long it was, the others weren't sure, but finally they reached land. A worn dock that was falling apart due to years of neglect met them. There were also crates that looked like they had been smashed by something at some point, and everything was overgrown; showing that no people had been here in years. They docked the boat where they could in a space where the vegetation was not as thick, and slowly clamored out.

Zoro waited briefly for everyone to situate themselves before he started walking as if he had been there before. He of course hadn't, and the teen didn't know how to describe the feeling he had – like he *knew* where to go "just because." Not that that explanation was very satisfactory.

For the others, the island was simply covered in a fog that was so thick they couldn't see more than four feet from where they were, so they stuck close.

"How long have we been walking?" Kimimaro asked, mostly talking to himself.

"About twenty minutes." Zoro replied without missing a beat.

"How do you know?" Haku now asked. How on earth could Zoro know that when they couldn't even see the sun?

Zoro paused to look back at the younger teen. "Actually... I don't know... I just *do*, I guess?"

"We'll chalk that up to being one the Kūhaku's oddities." Zabuza said.

It wasn't long (only to Zoro, really) before they came upon what appeared to be the entrance to a maze. It was made up of junk; slabs of sheet metal, wood, dead branches and broken tools, and then some, all covered with overgrown foliage consisting of various bushes, trees,

and vines. The fog was also much thicker here, and seemed to get even thicker further into the maze.

Zoro simply stepped forward, but was stopped by Naruto.

"I don't think we should go in there..." the boy said, his voice failed to hide his worry.

Zoro scowled. "Why not?"

"Because it's a *maze*!" Naruto insisted. "I don't want to be wandering around a maze for the rest of my life!"

Zoro was about to argue about not getting lost when Zabuza spoke up. "Naruto, just let Zoro guide us."

Naruto looked at Zabuza as if the man had just suggested that they all links arms and skip around singing happy-go-lucky songs.

"The Kūhaku were said to be guides in the Mist, so just let him go. We'll stick close."

Zoro didn't bother to mask the smirk on his face. He gave Naruto a light flick on his forehead. "Brat."

Naruto scowled and stuck out his tongue, but followed quickly after his brother. The procession stuck even closer to Zoro, and although there were times that even Zabuza was sure that they were walking in circles; not once did they run into a dead-end.

Haku thought that he could keep track of where they were by using various pieces of junk as a landmark of sorts. If branches were twisted in a certain way, or a piece of junk had something unique about it, he filed it away in the back of his mind. But it was long before even as he tried to focus, it felt like there was a veil over his mind. Everything slowly began to look the same while being different at the same time.

There must have been some sort of Genjutsu – and an extremely powerful one at that – on the environment itself. If an intruder could somehow find the island and get through the fog leading to the maze, they'd have to then navigate their way through. Where would they end up if there wasn't a Kūhaku to guide them?

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Everyone save for Zoro, wondered how long they had been walking

and didn't bother to ask. Finally, after what felt like hours when in reality was only roughly thirty minutes if that, they came upon a large, circular clearing.

"Oh, great kami-sama..." Kimimaro breathed as his eyes widened. In front of them was a large, very precarious-looking structure that looked like it could topple at any given moment. But that wasn't what had his attention. High above them, was a perfectly circular view of the clear, blue sky. "I've never seen the sky before..."

He never thought he would.

"What in the hell...?"

Sure, Zabuza was impressed by the large clearing that was several acres wide, with numerous vast ponds scattered around the property. But what had his attention was the building. It was several stories high; possibly being almost ten or so. It was built in a way where it was to a certain degree thin on the bottom while getting thicker the higher it went before thinning out again. There were a number of branching off sections of the house that were built like walkways and were supported by several crooked beams.

There were also hundreds of mismatched windows covering the building; many of which were uselessly installed in ways the people inside couldn't even open them. There were doors built in that simply opened into the open air several stories up.

There must have been some sort of eccentric yet structural genius that somehow found ways to keep the structure from toppling. Perhaps even Jutsu had been used? Was the building even safe to enter?

"Wow..." Gaara's eyes shined with excitement. He looked up at Zoro. "Are we going to go in, Zoro-nii?"

Zoro stared at the building that honestly looked like an exuberant child had thrown together. Even he wondered if it was safe to go in. Well...he had come this far. "Let's go in, I guess."

"Which door, though?" Naruto wondered. "There's like *hundreds* of 'em, 'tebayo!"

After circling the building, Zoro paused.

"This one." Zoro said, standing at one of the doors. He pulled on it, and at first it didn't budge. But a feeling that he needed to do

something lingered in the back of his mind. With a deep breath, Zoro pushed a bit of his chakra into the door and tried opening it again. This time, the door opened, and the others followed him in.

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Inside, the best way to describe the place was 'creepy'. It was quiet, the only noise coming from the six males slowly making their way through. While there was a thin layer of dust, it still looked relatively clean, like time had somehow paused while the world continued moving around it. Added to the 'creepy' factor was that nothing was built straight. The halls curved ever so slightly and the walls were crooked. There were doors and windows that opened only to reveal walls and even rooms that were so small they couldn't even function as a closet. There were even windows inside that gave them views of the interior of other rooms. It was truly disconcerting.

For once, as long as he could remember, the world around him wasn't shifting. Zoro took in everything, feeling an odd sort of comfort at being here. It had nothing to do with connecting to his ancestors or anything, it was mostly because there were no distractions here – the paths didn't move, and while he had never been here before, he *just knew* where he was going.

Finally, Zoro came upon what he was looking for, even though he hadn't stated the desire out loud: there was a large room with scrolls that lined one of the far walls to their left. There were bookshelves that lined the wall in front of them, with hundreds of books and a few more scrolls. Along the wall to their right was a desk covered in various papers and scrolls, and a worn map that covered almost the entirety of the wall.

Zoro 'hmmed' and walked up to the map and pulled out his own worn map from his pocket.

"What...?" Zabuza stared at the large map in disbelief, and the others were right behind him. The map depicted an odd mountain in the center, which circled around the world, while things called "*Calm Belts*" whatever those were, circled the world as well. Located within one of the Belts way beyond a place called *Fishman Island* and various other islands with strange names was the Elemental Nations.

(Zabuza briefly wondered if these Fishmen looked like Kisame did)

In fact, the Elemental Nations was *much* bigger than it had been depicted on their own "world" maps. Countries that bordered the

Elemental Nations had been practically cut in half. What was beyond the borders?

Zoro's voice interrupted Zabuza's thoughts. "That's where I came in," Zoro said, pointing to a small island on the larger map. A circle was scrawled next to it with a number. The number next to the small island indicated that it led to Kiri – and Zabuza's eyes widened when he saw another number next to a point in Kiri that led to... a point in the Land of Wind.

Zoro had been in Kiri for a while before he had gotten lost in the desert.

He had claimed that Kiri had moved... until now, Zabuza had just assumed that Zoro was an idiot who somehow managed to get drastically lost. Well, admittedly he still was, but not to the extent Zabuza had been tempted to think at times.

The stories claimed that Kūhaku were ghosts that could appear out of nowhere... if these 'access points' were spread throughout the Elemental Nations, then that explained quite a few of the legends surrounding them. But that didn't really explain why Zoro got lost in the first place, because from what Zabuza could gather, ending up in Suna the first time hadn't been part of the plan in any way.

Upon further investigation of the map, it looked as if the 'gates' or whatever they were called had apparently been broken at some point because they were crossed out.

"They knew..." Haku whispered. "The Kūhaku knew about the barrier..." he looked at the map, brow furrowing. "And they left."

Haku narrowed his eyes. He was not bitter, not at all. In fact, he was concerned. "They *knew* but never said anything – the question is *why*? Who put up the barrier like it is and *why*?" Haku asked. The others looked to him and Haku continued, possible theories buzzing through his head. "If they knew about the barrier, and didn't say anything, there *had* to have been something going on that prevented them from telling people."

Perhaps they were forbidden from telling anyone? But then, why stay within the Elemental Nations when apparently they could leave at any time? And then the war with Iwa happened and they saw no reason to stay or even share the information with anyone.

What about *before*? There were stories that said the Kūhaku worked with other villages, so they had to at least have been on friendly

terms, right? So what happened that caused the barrier to be built and cutting everyone else off from the outside world? No-one could leave and none could enter – not without a Kūhaku, it seemed.

"What do people say about the Elemental Nations out there, Roronoa?"

"Nothing, really. From what Koshiro was able to gather, Shinobi are just folklore and games kids like to play. The Elemental Nations is really just more of that folklore." Zoro shrugged, an action he seemed to be doing a lot of lately. "East Blue isn't really a place where learning about long-dead history is a thing, anyway."

Zabuza just nodded, taking all of this in. There was a certain heaviness in the air.

Kimimaro and Haku looked at the books lining the bookshelves. The former walked up to inspect them.

"These are journals..." Kimimaro admired the fact that they had stayed so intact over the years.

"Do you mind if we look at them?" Haku asked Zoro.

"Knock yourselves out, I don't care." Zoro replied. Why should it matter to him if the two teens looked at decades-old stories about his ancestors? But it was in Haku's character to ask, so Zoro wasn't annoyed.

Honestly, he had his eyes on something else. He walked over to the shelf that housed numerous scrolls and pulled one out. He intended to start training, but Naruto's growling stomach stopped him. Naruto blushed and rubbed the back of his head.

"Oh..." Zoro realized. It had actually been hours since they last ate that morning, no wonder Naruto was hungry. "We should probably eat, first."

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It turned out that exploring wasn't an option unless Zoro was with the one doing the exploring. Being curious, Kimimaro had decided to look through the house just to see what he could find. Unfortunately, he found nothing but dead ends as any doors that he opened always led to a wall or a several stories high drop whenever he found a door that led outside.

The teen almost ran into Zoro as he turned a corner. Kimimaro jumped back in surprise, startling Zoro as well.

"What the hell, Kimimaro?! Where have you been?"

"I was just looking around..." Kimimaro had no idea why Zoro looked both annoyed and very relieved to see him.

"You've been gone for *hours*." Zoro said, emphasizing the last word. "We were starting to become concerned."

"Hours'?" Kimimaro asked, disbelievingly. It honestly hadn't felt *that* long.

"Yeah, you weren't the only one. We're putting up rope guides so that people can find their way around." Zoro indicated a rope in his hand that Kimimaro hadn't noticed before. "Tape-Face got lost just trying to find the bathroom..." Zoro snorted, his expression showing that he had been amused by Zabuza's predicament. "So since I'm the only one who can get anywhere with no trouble, I'll just be a bit longer..."

It went without saying that Kimimaro stuck close to Zoro as they walked through the house. There were times that Kimimaro was absolutely *positive* that he had opened a door that lead nowhere, only to have Zoro open it and find a large room on the other side. Zoro tied the other end of the rope to a kunai and channeled a bit of chakra into it after jamming the kunai into the wall.

"So the house is tied to your chakra, or more specifically; the Kūhaku's..." Kimimaro observed.

"I guess...it's kinda annoying." Glancing around, Zoro sighed, muttering, "There's still more rooms...we'll need more rope...well, let's head back."

00oo00

Within the confines of his prison, Kyuubi was thinking back about the map they had seen in that room. Something in his memory arose unbidden.

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Kyuubi was sitting across from someone on a rock, a satisfied smile was on the man's face. Kyuubi's siblings were there as well, all looking at the man as he set his sword aside and his companion pulled out two scrolls from his

pack.

"I come bearing gifts!" the man announced jovially, and his companion simply rolled his eyes in amusement, obviously used to this behavior.

******-san, if you would please?"*

******-san, I am," the companion replied, laying out the scrolls.*

The latter made a hand sign, and unsealed the scrolls' contents.

***"OH, WOW!"** Nanabi exclaimed excitedly, upon seeing the biggest sake bottle any of them had ever seen, along with nine sake cups. The two small Humans could just as easily use those cups to bathe in! And the size of that sake bottle – it could almost serve a secondary purpose as a small house for the Humans as well!*

The Human with the shiny black sword asked, ever so politely and warmly. "If you would do the honors, Ku-san?"

Kyuubi was shocked. He had given that Human his name! And he had used it as if they were old friends. Who was that man?

Kyuubi smiled, well, it was more of a smirk, and complied, carefully pouring the sake for all those present – even carefully pouring what was a few drops into the cups of the two Humans.

"Thank-you, Ku-sama," the second Human said with a respectful bow of his head, towards Kyuubi.

"Kampai!"

"This is so good!"** Hachibi praised, clearly enjoying the taste. **"You weren't lying, **-san!"***

He could taste the cool warmth of that sake like it was yesterday; the way it pleasantly burned going down, feeling its warmth envelope his entire body.

*"Well, my country not only produces some of the best warriors," the man gave a 'yours truly' sort of bow, but it was awkward due to his sitting down, and smirked at his Human companion, "No offense, *****-san!"*

"None taken. Your country has the right to brag." The man's silver eyes glinted with mirth.

"Anyway, my homeland also produces the best sake on the Grand Line!" he shrugged, taking another drink. "Although, if I were to be honest - I'm

probably biased, saying that."

The man burst into amused laughter.

Kyuubi silently cursed, because the gaps in his memory interfered with the names of these Humans who used his name so casually, as if they were old friends. In order for him to have given his name to these Humans, they must have done something to earn it.

"We're lucky that Giants are out there, otherwise I'm not sure how else we could have done this," the first Human said. He gave the Bijū one of his rare and genuine smiles. "I'm glad you like it, my friends."

He had been happy then – he had been *free*. Kyuubi longed for that freedom yet again.

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How long had he been sleeping, thanks to that fucking little brat? Ichibi didn't like that Gaara had suddenly taken to completely ignoring him. He wasn't sure what was worse: being annoyed by a whiny, 'tell me your name, let's be friends' or complete silence.

As Gaara's memories from the last few days flowed in, Ichibi narrowed his eyes. This Roronoa kid... *irked* him. But in light of all that, Ichibi observed as Zoro took down Kyuubi's host, and comforted the brat – why was Zoro different from the other Humans? As he argued that, *"These two are just kids; they aren't fighting in your war."*

His posture showing that he would draw his swords and fight – he was defending *two* Jinchuuriki. As far as Ichibi could remember, no Human had done that for him. Just then, a voice broke through his thoughts:

"You can't do this! This isn't right! They should not be contained! The Bijū are not creatures that you can just lock up in a cage!"

The voice was so angry and desperate, and he could *almost* see the owner of that voice.

The Human was angry; begging and pleading for him, while another was desperately pulling that man away. The owner of the voice was fighting against the second Human, trying to get to the others, demanding why the one pulling on his arm not step up and stop the Sealing process. It was cruel, and it was wrong. The one who was pulling the first Human away, was looking at Ichibi with anger, yet that anger was not directed at him.

Ichibi could not make out the facial features, but he just knew that both of those Humans were angry for him.

What was that memory?

"No! I mean – I'm not from the Elemental Nations at all."

"I'm from out there."

"There's some kind of...powerful Genjutsu pillar forest thing that surrounds the entire Elemental Nations. I'm from an island in East Blue, called Crescent Island, and I grew up in Shimotsuki Village."

Zoro couldn't explain things for shit, but that forest had always been there, for hundreds of years. They were the *Hidden Villages* after all. Wait...*how* did Ichibi *know* that? How had he forgotten? It had been so many years since he had thought of it. But it had changed – amidst fear and panic, they had forced the change to happen. He couldn't remember why.

And then, there was the map that Zoro pulled out. Yet another memory assaulted Ichibi.

OoOoO

The Human sat on a rock, grinning at Ichibi. He adjusted his black blade so that it rested on his shoulder.

"No way, you have to be lying!" Ichibi shouted, almost childishly. *He had never heard something so ridiculous!*

"Yes, it's true, Shu-san!" the Human insisted, as he pointed to a section on the map. "The Sea Kings are..." he raised his arms and spread out his hands for emphasis, "HUGE! Some even bigger than you and your siblings, for certain! I even managed to kill one!" He snorted and looked very prideful at this statement.

It was obvious he wasn't lying. This man clearly had the right to brag, considering what he was capable of.

"How big do they get?"

"There are ones even bigger than the one I killed," the Human replied. He looked around before pointing to a mountain. "In fact, they can get around even that size!"

"So, why don't these Sea Kings bother the ships around here?"

"That's because of those pillars you have surrounding the place – Sea Stone. It pretty much feels like the ocean itself to them."

This Human always had such incredible stories whenever he came to visit. This place was his favorite, and the Biju always looked forward to his visits. This man always made it a point to come see them whenever he came to the Elemental Nations...

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Ichibi was once again pulled out of his memory. It was confusing, because a Human whose face he couldn't remember and whose name was just out of reach had earned his respect to the point that he childishly enjoyed listening to the man's incredible tales and the man had used *his* name. Ichibi *loathed* Humanity and the hypocrites that they were. As far as he was concerned, Humanity could go fuck itself in the ass with a rusty kunai.

But there was the same Human in his distant memory who looked up at him and said, *"I don't think you're a monster."*

And now, here was a Human who believed that Ichibi and Kyuubi were deserving of respect; that using their power needed to be earned, and not demanded of; that believed that the Biju had names that should be given only when their host had earned the right to hear it; who still willingly made physical contact with a host when he witnessed just a mere preview of the horrors a Jinchuuriki was capable of; who stood in between them and another person declaring that his host would not fight in a war when it was obvious that's what a Jinchuuriki's sole purpose was.

It was not about the power his host and the stupid blond contained; it was the fact that they were *children*. It was naïve thinking, yet... Ichibi observed the scene again. There were only a few people that Ichibi could remember saying such things. A pang was felt in Ichibi's chest, something of the annoying sort. He found that maybe, just *maybe* he was starting to grow fond of this odd Human from the Outside; just as he had of that Human so many years before.

Chapter End Notes

The Winchester Mystery House was the inspiration behind the Kūhaku Compound's appearance and description, except with a Japanese architecture twist.

The Winchester Mystery House is a mansion in San Jose,

California, which was once the personal residence of Sarah Winchester, the widow of gun magnate William Wirt Winchester. Located at 525 South Winchester Blvd. in San Jose, the Queen Anne Style Victorian mansion is renowned for its size, its architectural curiosities, and its lack of any master building plan.

Long story short: a medium told Sarah she basically had to continuously build a home for herself and the spirits of people who had been killed by Winchester rifles in order to appease them. So she used her fortune to fund the building processes, never stopping; even at night, right up until she died.

That Which Lurks Underneath and is completely a Forgotten Relic of History Should Probably Cause Some Concern

Chapter Summary

If anyone asked Zabuza, he'd swear up-and-down that the Third Mizukage was downright crazy. But revelations within the Kūhaku's history show that the Mizukage might not be so crazy after all. Haku has to wonder if everything he's been taught about the Biju has been wrong. Meanwhile, Zoro tries to learn a bit about his Kekkei Genkai, and it's not easy going. A promise is a promise, and Zoro is ready to leave with Naruto and Gaara. Except it's not going to be that easy.

Chapter Notes

A haiku:
Oh, thank you, lovelies,
For reading
What I wrote. Kudos

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Both Haku and Kimimaro just about dove into reading the various journals that lined the wall of the office. The journals had been written by various Kūhaku Clan members, covering events within the Elemental Nations and the various day-to-day lives of the Clan. They had been dated by year, month, and were numbered chronologically on the spines.

A symbol of two interlocking circles that had cancel-out signs, with two ends meeting at the top to make a sort of 'A' shape was on each of the journals.

"It must be the Clan symbol..." Kimimaro said thoughtfully. It suited the Clan perfectly.

Reading them showed that they had been written by various Clan members throughout their time residing within this place.

There was a single journal left on the desk, lightly covered in a layer of dust. Haku picked it up, noticing that a section of it had been bookmarked. Haku opened the journal and turned to the last page that

had been written on, which was dated somewhere within the 185-year mark.

'If you're reading this that means you have returned to Kūhakugakure after we left it behind. However long we have been gone, be it months or years, welcome home. We purposefully left our Clan's scrolls behind if someone ever decided to return.

The betrayal from the First Mizukage has been a long-time coming. Kiri and Iwa turned on us when we were preparing for battle. We can only theorize why they did this, and considering the fact that seed of mistrust towards us has been blossoming for years, the betrayal wasn't really that surprising.

Even though we have lost some of our own, we haven't been wiped out. We Kūhaku are notorious for being stubborn bastards who cling to life simply to piss the Shinigami off. But it looks like the Shinigami finally got one over on us, this time around.

We have finally made the unanimous decision to leave this prison.

Clearly, you have passed through one of the remaining Gates, crossed the barrier and entered these blood-soaked lands. For whatever reason you have decided to not stay away, there are some things you must understand: only the Kūhaku know about the barrier, and we have kept it that way for good reason.

I have no way of knowing the state of things by the time you read this, but if you do decide to inform someone about the barrier, I implore you to be careful who you tell. Perhaps the current Elders and the Daimyo of your time truly don't know what lies beyond the barrier, but perhaps they do and simply play along with the magnificent stories everyone has about the fog.

If you view us as cowards and fools or even traitors, I can understand and don't blame you. Bullheadedness is simply an aspect we Kūhaku have in all areas of life.

There are some things you must understand:

So you don't have to dig through the dusty tomes of people long gone searching for answers, know that the barrier has been up long before we Kūhaku came into existence – but it was so different then. Not like it is now. Everyone knew that it was

there, but it was like a great, impenetrable wall that protected a palace from invaders. But it was instead turned into a prison.

Us Kūhaku essentially had our own island village, and were much like Uzushioagakure.

While we had partnered with Kirigakure, we never become a part of them. Many thought it was because we liked our independence so much, but as stated earlier, we knew that they didn't trust us. Perhaps now you're wondering why we never partnered with Kirigakure in the first place, then none of this would have happened. Perhaps you're correct, but our ancestors were unwilling to subject their descendants to the fate of ignorance.'

What followed was a long series of various dates and numbers, and 'entry numbers' before someone named Kūhaku Hachiro wished the reader well.

Afterwards, there was an entry that consisted of a list of the dead, numbering almost twenty-five people, but while it wasn't stated what had killed them, Haku could guess. He looked at the numbers that were listed before glancing over at the journals lining the shelves. Haku went about picking out the journals listed, which there was a good number of, but it wouldn't take him that long if he simply went to the entries, but that didn't stop him from skimming other entries.

Kimimaro meanwhile, had come across something interesting: a family tree consisting of hundreds of names that went back for a few hundred generations.

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In the meantime, outside, Gaara and Naruto were practicing a few of their own Jutsu while Zabuza observed the two and Zoro, who had a few of his Clan's scrolls. He frowned as he skimmed over the one currently in his hand, and Zabuza silently observed the annoyed scowl for a few minutes before sighing and approaching Zoro.

"Something the matter?" the man asked nonchalantly.

Zoro muttered a few curses under his breath in annoyance before responding, "I dunno...this one scroll mentions the *Kirigakure no Jutsu* and acts like its special, or something."

The comment caused Zabuza to raise an invisible eyebrow. "Those Shinobi from before used it. It's a damn useful technique for getting a

leg up on your opponents."

But why would the Kūhaku have a scroll about it among their Clan's scrolls?

"Yeah, well I don't like using it..." Zoro replied. Noticing Zabuza's questioning gaze, the teen added, "It feels like cheating, somehow... like, I only won 'cause my opponent couldn't see me, and not necessarily because of my swordsmanship."

Zabuza scoffed. "I don't know if that's your inner Konoha leaking out or your blatant idiocy."

Zoro redirected his scowl to Zabuza. He honestly considered mouthing off an insult, but decided he didn't feel like it right then. He'd much rather get to training his Kekkei Genkai. "My *Kirigakure no Jutsu* isn't that special anyways. The few times I tried it, it was always really thin and easy to see through. I could never channel enough chakra to get it right..."

So he had stopped trying, as demeaning as it was. He couldn't channel his chakra into the environment or something like he was supposed to. At least he could focus his chakra to tree and water-walk easily enough. Attempting to channel chakra like Koshiro had told him to just didn't work right for him, and trying too hard made him feel like he was spinning upside-down while trying not to throw up.

"Let's see it then." Zabuza said.

"See what?"

"Your *Kirigakure no Jutsu*. I could probably give you some pointers. I don't know if Koshiro knew how to do the Jutsu – did he?"

Zoro just nodded.

"Well, get your ass up and get to it."

Zoro muttered under his breath again, and got into a spot a distance away from the two boys and stood several feet away from Zabuza.

Taking out his swords, Zoro channeled his chakra into them, using them as a sort of focus point for this Jutsu. He could feel a connection to the water all around him, and instinctively pulled it towards him.

"*Kirigakure no Jutsu!*"

There was the sound of water sloshing, and within seconds, the field was absolutely covered in a thick mist; very much like the one that surrounded the little island – but it was even more unnerving.

Zabuza's eyes widened, and a shiver ran up his spine. This particular *Kirigakure no Jutsu* was vastly different than what either he or Haku or the other Kiri-Nin could do. His vision was filled with nothing but an ever-shifting grayish-white. It was like he could actually feel the mist around him; like it had substance. It felt like hundreds of insects tickling across his skin, and even though his hand was less than three inches from his face, it was nothing more than an outline.

Zabuza swung his sword through the mist, only for it to look like it separated for a few brief seconds before swirling back together. Why had Zoro said his *Kirigakure no Jutsu* was weak?

He heard shifting within the fog, and knew that Zoro was moving towards him – or was Zoro already next to him? It was unnerving that the noises; every breath and footstep, the singing metal of Zoro's blades echoed all around him, sounding so close yet so far away, making it extremely difficult to pinpoint a location. It was very reminiscent of using Sound Genjutsu to throw your opponent on edge. The feather-light touches increased his paranoia, and Zabuza actually fought to keep his wits about him.

He then saw shadows moving in the mist, looking like the ways numerous mirrors would reflect light. But this time, it was shadows moving towards and away from him; covered in various levels of thickness that made it hard to tell how close Zoro actually was, and which one was the actual Zoro.

Something charged at Zabuza from the side, and he quickly moved to block it, only for him to realize that Zoro was coming at him from above! Zabuza swiftly moved to make a water clone, but it was sluggish and slowly falling apart, only to be absorbed into the mist.

Shadows kept leaping at him, before the fog slowly dissipated, leaving Zabuza feeling slightly frazzled, and Zoro in slight awe.

Okay, maybe Zoro was in fact relieved that it wasn't because he was screwing something up. As a child, yes, he had tried it numerous times while outside, but maybe it was because his chakra was underdeveloped at the time, or he wasn't close enough to a big enough water source, but it had always been too thin in more place than it

was thick, and too patchy to be of any use, and had left him exhausted. So he had given that aspect up simply because he thought it could go nowhere. He had used the *Kirigakure no Jutsu* a few times in the past as he had gotten older if he somehow had a reason to use it, but that also explained its inconsistencies. Now, he was wondering if it had to do with how close the water was to his vicinity.

Okay, maybe he was curious to explore this Jutsu - just for practical uses.

"Thanks, Tape-Face."

Now, Zabuza was looking at Zoro with curiosity as he walked back over to the scrolls and was muttering to himself about trying another one. If that was what it was like with just one Kūhaku, what was it like facing five or more? Plus, the Kūhaku's version of the *Kirigakure no Jutsu* not only relied on a sufficient water source, but also made water clones useless as it absorbed moisture – easily separating out the real one. Would that mist have the same effect on Water Jutsu? Or if the Water Jutsu was powerful and fast enough, could it get through? Or maybe if enough chakra was applied, could it shield the Water Jutsu, if at all?

"Hey, Tape-Face." Zoro called out, interrupting Zabuza's thoughts. Zabuza could see a light blush on Zoro's face as he asked, "...Would you mind helping me with this Jutsu too? I need to practice it on a person..."

"Is it really that hard for you to ask for help?" Zabuza asked with a smirk that was obvious, even under his bandages.

"Are you gonna help me or not?!"

"Fine, fine. What's the Jutsu?"

"*Sora surasshu gihō*." Zoro answered.

Not liking how that sounded, Zabuza asked, "What does it do?"

"It..." Zoro glanced down at the scroll, studying the script. "It phases through the opponent, cutting them internally."

"..." Zabuza blinked a few times, and created a clone. "Here's your target practice."

"You're going to have one of your clones face me?"

"I don't want to be cut up internally or otherwise..." Zabuza answered flatly.

"Spoilsport..." Zoro muttered as he gave Zabuza a withering look.

"Don't act like you're disappointed you couldn't practice that damn technique against the real me!" Zabuza found himself shouting. He internally cursed, because that odd pull had happened to him again.

Zabuza, Naruto, and Gaara all stared in unblinkingly at the image of Zoro sticking out of the Zabuza clone at odd angles; like something akin to Zoro's appearance had grown out of the clone in abstract horror. The clone screamed as it exploded back into water, and Zoro crashed to the ground with a very wet-sounding 'splat'.

"...You *actually* wanted to try that technique on *me*?!" Zabuza demanded.

Zoro just shrugged after a moment. "It wasn't that bad, was it? I'm sure we could've patched the worst of it together."

"Roronoa, your head was technically sticking out of my spine, your arms out of my back and chest, and your legs out of my stomach. You then proceeded to *rip* me apart. *There's no way I could've survived that!*"

"I wouldn't mind seeing that happen again." Gaara said quietly.

His staring had mostly been to fascination, and not necessarily the terrifying horror that both Naruto and especially Zabuza experienced.

Zabuza glared at Gaara. The kid was twisted, that was for sure.

OoOoOoO

Kimimaro was looking at the Kūhaku's family tree, when he came across something he found rather interesting. It was near the end of the seventh century that the Kūhaku being born at the time were suddenly dying off relatively young after almost 200 years of the Clan's existence. Some of them were only living till their teenage years, while others were only living till their twenties, and even fewer were living till their mid-thirties, not even surviving passed thirty-seven.

He pulled out one of the diaries that was dated for those years, and discovered a rather gruesome fact about why the Clan was slowly dying off: their internal organs were getting twisted or ruptured,

sometimes even misplaced whenever their Kekkei Genkai was activated to its fullest. Others were simply dying from organ failure before even reaching their early teenage years.

It was sort of like what was happening to him: their attempts at keeping the Kekkei Genkai within the Clan pure was rearing its ugly head as very deadly organ failure from inbreeding ran rampant throughout the Clan.

As their numbers dwindled from almost two hundred to roughly ninety or so people in less than sixty-eight years, a few of the Elders and Clan Leaders then came up with a desperate plan to prevent themselves from dying off completely. The key would be civilians, so that there would be no competing Kekkei Genkai. That was when they started taking in war orphans and other people with no family to go back to, who were then used to become future husbands and wives for the full-blooded Kūhaku. The people were always given a choice, as they didn't want trouble within their compound.

It was then that what was pretty much an elaborate breeding program was started: full-blooded Kūhaku would have numerous partners that resulted in having numerous children, and those children went on to have children together. There were still a few surviving Kūhaku that were older than some of the "mixed" children by a decade or two, and as soon as the children reached adulthood, they went on to have children themselves with the full-blooded Kūhaku.

Kimimaro in all honesty, felt mildly disturbed at the thought, but he could understand where they were coming from. Because of this, their numbers exploded back into the hundreds, nearing almost three-hundred people. Their marriages weren't as complicated further down the line, but there were still a few Kūhaku who had polygamous relationships, and they still searched for new blood to keep their bloodline from having any Kekkei Genkai-related diseases.

Looking over some of the family tree names which suddenly started sounding rather odd, if he were to be honest. They were foreign sounding, much like Zoro's name was.

As Kimimaro searched through the various books, he came across a sketchbook filled by drawings done by a woman named Kūhaku Ikue. According to the dates written, she had been alive during late seventh century. The drawings consisted of family members, animals, and even...Kimimaro took in the sight of the Bijū.

In all the illustrations he had ever seen of the creatures, they had been made out to be monsters; the things of nightmares. But here, there were sketches of them sunbathing, a picture of the Nibi sitting across from someone playing a board game, and others of the Bijū simply acting like people. Kimimaro frowned in thought. Was everything he had ever been taught about the Bijū...wrong?

There were various comments written in soft scrawl next to the drawings at times;

'Bon-san plays Go with Nibi-sama'

'Ichibi-sama sunbathing'

'Yonbi-sama enjoying sake from Elbaf'

'Kohan-sama visits from our sister country'

There was more than one drawing of a man named 'Ryuuma' who looked very much like Zoro – Kimimaro studied the drawings. Zoro didn't have the same high and defined cheekbones and his chin wasn't as narrow, and this man had dark hair, but he looked very much like Zoro. Or rather, Zoro looked like him. This had to be one of Zoro's direct ancestors, no doubt.

When Kimimaro saw Ikue's name, he looked at the family tree and realized that while Ikue and Ryuuma had never married, had three children together. But Ikue had never married anyone else, nor had she had children again with anyone after Ryuuma. The date next to Ryuuma's name had only his birth year while his date of death remained blank.

Kimimaro looked at the names thoughtfully, questioning if Ryuuma had left Ikue behind. Their children had gone on to have children of their own, going on for generations before finally stopping 185 years ago for obvious reasons.

The teen put the sketchbook to the side, figuring he would show it to Zoro later. He then came across a book filled with numerous illustrations of the clan members and their partners. The passage of time had allowed color to fade from the drawings, but they were no less detailed. The drawings were portraits of all the couples – often one Kūhaku member appeared more than once, always with a different partner; sometimes a Kūhaku appeared only once with one partner. While the Kūhaku seemed to have various hair colors that would have blatantly stood out in the Elemental Nations, the one

thing that made each of them distinctive was silver-colored eyes.

Kimimaro admired the drawings here as well. The artist had captured spirit into their drawings of the people. He came upon one drawing in particular – recognizing Ryuuma from Ikue's own sketchbook. Ryuuma was drawn standing next to a woman with long purple hair and silver eyes, and Kimimaro read the characters, '**Ryuuma and Kūhaku Ikue**', written elegantly on the side of the picture. There was something drawn in their expressions that made Kimimaro curious as to what had been going on at that time. Ryuuma's expression was very serious, but it almost looked as if he were trying to fake it, while Ikue had a small smirk drawn into her features, as if she knew something the others didn't.

Kimimaro looked through the rest of the book, taking in the sight of other men and even women at times, held a heavy resemblance to Zoro. It was a rather sad thing when the drawings stopped. Kimimaro smiled sadly at the book in his hands, because he knew that happiness between these people didn't last. He took the photobook and placed it on the sketchbook as well. Standing and stretching his stiff limbs, Kimimaro then walked over to Haku, to see if he had found anything interesting as well.

Kimimaro opened the photobook to the picture of Ryuuma and Ikue, and showed it to Haku.

Haku noticed the similarities almost immediately. "Zoro-san sort of looks like him, doesn't he?"

"Out of curiosity, did you happen to find anything about a 'sister country'?"

Haku shook his head. As far as Haku knew, none of the Elemental Nations considered itself to be 'sisters' with anyone. Perhaps it was a country that had disappeared long ago? Or rather...his gaze went up to the map on the wall for a moment. It had been a country that the Elemental Nations had forgotten about. A cursory glance over the map on the wall showed nothing.

"I'm not sure what it is, there's still a lot of information to cover... It's just really complicated."

He then showed Haku the drawings of the Bijū, and Haku started thinking along the same lines as Kimimaro: were the Bijū really the monsters everyone had made them out to be?

Glancing at the diary in Haku's hands, Kimimaro asked, "Anything interesting for you?"

"One of them actually mentions this Ryuuma person a few times, someone named Joy Boy in that journal there, something called the 'Elemental Islands' is mentioned more than once, along with a few other people who were visiting from other countries. The Kūhaku also had a love for East Blue in particular because of how peaceful it was – plus there was a love for the foods that some of the East Blue islands were famous for... So they had a base there. It was the place to go if you wanted to reach the Elemental Nations, apparently." Haku had to give his eyes a break, so he stretched and yawned, laying back to look at the ceiling. "But it wasn't really a matter of simply going to the base; it was finding it because you happened upon a Kūhaku who on a completely different island enjoying the local food..."

Both teens had to share a laugh at the idea of someone having to wait for a person to come to whatever islands took their fancy because of its food simply on a whim.

"From the look of things, this 'Genjutsu forest' that Zoro described has actually been there for a long time, but was simply used to prevent people from finding the Elemental Nations easily. It was described as being an 'impenetrable wall' while the Kūhaku acted as guides to and from places with those Gateways."

Picking up one of the journals, Haku pointed to a passage. "Shinobi would take on missions to the Outside, and would always have a place and a certain time that they met with the Kūhaku when they needed to return to well, here... there were a lot of rules the Kūhaku and other Shinobi had established so that no-one would be unable to return...those rules are apparently written down in a scroll somewhere. It was treated like a very serious contract, as well."

Haku stared at the journals and scrolls that lined the bookshelves, and wondered if it would even be worth it to try and search for one of the traveling contract scrolls that the Kūhaku had used. But he was exhausted, so after resting for a bit longer, Haku was back to reading one of the journals and its entries listed when his eyes widened, and his face started to look grim the more he read.

The diary he held was dated somewhere 900 years previously.

There were occasional and casual yet reverent mentions of the Bijū, who were actually free to roam around. The Bijū lived in a difficult to

reach area, often keeping to themselves and not interfering with Human affairs unless there was some kind of war or catastrophic event within the Elemental Nations. In fact, the Bijū kept an odd balance of sorts with the major powers of the Elemental Nations. The various authors of the entries even mentioned being friends with the Bijū, and had small excerpts from their conversations.

The authors always referred to the Bijū as 'sama', showing their upmost respect, and from what had been written about them, that respect was returned. More than one entry from the numerous authors happily and very proudly stated that a Bijū had 'given their names' to them – which was a joyous occasion. Haku had always heard that the Bijū were monsters to be feared, yet the Kūhaku always seemed to refer to them as people. The fact that the Bijū even had names and held insightful conversations, and those drawings of them was all starting to make Haku reevaluate what he thought he knew.

But something had happened, and somewhere in between the nine and eight-hundred year mark was where things got strange and extremely vague. Whatever had happened wasn't clear, and it wasn't because the Kūhaku of the time were withholding information, but rather they had no idea what was going on themselves. There were numerous entries stating the fear and confusion that everyone was feeling. Others hadn't been all that concerned, thinking that this didn't affect them, and the others were simply overreacting. But the point was, an entire country had disappeared – it had been completely wiped off the map.

The very idea was horrifying. How could an entire country be wiped out?

But as Haku read, he came across peculiar names unlike anything he had ever read before. Pluton, Poseidon, Uranus, and Hecate, that seemingly had to some degree to do with the country disappearing.

Haku paled when he read the name 'Hecate'. Something Zabuza-sama had mentioned about the confrontation with the Third Mizukage as Zabuza had delicately put it; 'utter, crazy bullshit' and the absurd strangeness of it all.

Who or what exactly was Hecate, and just how did the Third Mizukage know of her/it?

There were nearly ten pages' worth of back-and-forth between the Clan members detailing their concern over the situation. Something

called the World Government was established around this time as well.

More than once, various Kūhaku had been approached by odd people wanting them to lead them to the Elemental Nations. But they had always been refused, because of how these people were acting, and the Kūhaku members who had been approached by them each time described the people as being strange and somehow feeling off. They were well-aware that people had their own eccentricities, but these people didn't act anything like those who usually wanted to go to the Elemental Nations. Some offered money, while others threatened.

Some even asked not-so-subtle questions about Hecate, trying to pass it off as friendly conversation or acting like they were looking for someone who had the name. There were even a few instances where a Kūhaku was attacked, but was only able to escape because they had pulled off one of their ghosting techniques – or they killed the assailant in self-defense. But most of the time, it was better to retreat because fighting these people could be a hassle; especially if they had a certain kind of 'Devil Fruit' and 'Haki'.

But one thing was clear: they all worked for this established Government and none of the Kūhaku who had any interactions with these people liked them one bit. In fact, the Kūhaku started leaving as soon as they spotted someone they suspected might be working for the Government.

But it was with these events following others that caused a sort of domino effect within the Elemental Nations that only had the bare beginnings of Hidden Villages.

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Somewhere in the late 700-early 600 year mark:

"This is a situation in which I truly think we need to be concerned.

We have learned that in East Blue, the World Government has been constructing a bridge on the Island of Tequila Wolf, and if the calculations on the bridge's trajectory are correct, it is very likely their attempt to find the Elemental Nations or at least a Gate leading to it. It seems to be aimed in the general direction of our base.

One of our own took initiative and explored the bridge. No-one

working on it seems to know why they are there; they just know that they need to work on the bridge. They are slaves, and the disturbing thing is that these people apparently build small settlements only to abandon them after the construction reaches a certain point. It appears they don't even know why they are building it.

We already have a few islands and a base in East Blue with fully functioning gates, and if they manage to find one of our Gates...

There are those who believe that even without a Kūhaku present, one or more of their soldiers could possibly find us. Even though that is nothing more than a theory... Even so, they are incredibly strong and dangerous.

Update:

'Shit, shit, shit.

They have missing Nin amongst their ranks! Pammin couldn't tell what their affiliations were, as they no longer wore their identifying hitai-ate, but she saw them using Jutsu.

I am well aware how this looks for us. The others could easily point fingers at us and place the blame on us. We Kūhaku have more pride and honor in our pinky fingers than most Nin do in their entire bodies!

The point is, those Nin were not considered missing until after they had left.

We are not foolish enough to simply guide someone out without good reason – they had mission scrolls that had been officially signed and sealed by their respective Clan leaders, Elders, Daimyo, and Kage. The point is, they betrayed their countries after they left on those official missions!

Since we have warned the other Nations of this possible attack, they are getting more cooperative.

Many of the Nations do not get along, that goes without saying. In spite of this, since when do all the Clan and Villagers Elders and their Leaders, along with the Daimyo of every country gather in one place?

The talks will likely last for hours if not days. But time is of the

essence here. They are not stopping their construction of the bridge. It simply goes on, night and day.

Something which we have all agreed on is that we need to strengthen the barrier so that what happened to that place will not happen here. So the decision has been made to contact the Uzumaki Clan. They helped construct the barrier, and we can simply guide them where they need to go.

Kūhaku Ryoga'

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'In less than twelve hours, a decision has been made...

I don't like it. None of us like it. This is our fault. We should have done things differently.

The Bijū should be free. They are not tools nor mere beasts. None of us are willing to participate in this.

Besides, even if we wanted to, the Elders and the Daimyo probably wouldn't let us have them. They are looking for people with the 'right chakra', and we have been found lacking... and there would probably be worry about us somehow turning against our country or using the Bijū's power.

I don't like how some of our Kiri affiliates have been looking at us since this whole thing started. It's as if they think we'll guide our common enemies here; or as if we already did so, not that we would ever do such a thing. Our loyalty is to our Clan and our Country.

Kūhaku Otani'

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'Hecate has been Sealed away, as have the Bijū. There was a riot in more than one Country, as disagreements arise, and others are fighting for the Fruit. We ended up sending some of our (as they have been dubbed) 'Outsider' allies away. They do not deserve to get mixed up in our mess.

Those who rioted were made examples of by execution; and their bodies or even simply their heads line the streets of their respective villages. The Elders and the Daimyo act like this is war

instead of the senseless slaughter that it truly is. The imbalance of powers is worrying. Without the Biju's full presence, it is obvious that there are people vying for power and control with nothing to hold them back.

Ryuuma is a passionate and honorable fool, and if it had not been for Sakibaro's quick thinking, Ryuuma would have joined the dead.

Ikue is going to be crushed. And their children... children do not deserve to grow up without their father. But if Ikue leaves with him... they will more than certainly see it as a betrayal.

But decisions must be made and we must show where our loyalties lie. They are watching us very carefully, and if any 'Outsiders' are found, there are 'kill on sight' orders. They want to be sure that none of these Government Officials have somehow infiltrated the Elemental Nations; and that the rogue-Nin will not be able to return.

Fortunately, we have large enough numbers and Gates around the Elemental Nations, and we can be discreet.

We will ensure Ryuuma's and anyone else's return to the Outside if not their homelands, and then we will destroy the Gates. The Daimyo and other local lords want Hecate's Fruit, and have even killed people if they were found to be in possession of them. Since it's not as if we can use them, any Fruits we find we are throwing out to the ocean, as far too much blood has been shed over them. We will completely keep silent about the barrier. Hopefully, in time, they will forget and not be so suspicious of us. Yet that feeling in my gut tells me we won't be so lucky. There're those of you who will tell me to be more optimistic, but since when has my gut ever been wrong?

I think it is going to be a long day and night...

Kūhaku Kenji'

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Haku stared at the entries; a certain heaviness was on his heart, while confusion muddled his tired mind.

It was a terrifying thought to live knowing that your every move was being watched – Haku knew the feeling all too well. He had been able

to adapt and pretend to be someone he wasn't so that he could blend in and no-one was the wiser. But it appeared that in the Kūhaku's case, that suspicion directed towards them never truly went away, even after numerous generations. People probably hadn't said why they were suspicious, because they had to comply with the set-upon rules, but the following generations simply assumed that they should be. Manhunts and the slaughtering of villagers weren't anything new, but the degree it had been carried out...

Another reason the Kūhaku likely weren't trusted was that they had gone against the orders of the Daimyo at the time. It must have been a slap in the face to have a Clan like the Kūhaku actually step in to try and save those the other countries were hunting, all while trying to be subtle and show that they were in fact on the same side.

Plus, the all-around agreement to never speak of the 'Outside' and simply pretend that it never had existed at all, left Haku with a very uncomfortable feeling. They had truly been cut off from the world.

Haku started trying to piece together the information he could gleam from what he had read.

Hecate was something powerful, and the people back then believed that the World Government would somehow use it, and were even looking for it... but if something like this took place, why had it been covered up? It was as if everyone within that generation simply didn't talk about what had happened, and any whispers had been lost to the wind.

But what really had Haku confused was Hecate. What was 'Hecate's Fruit'? No-one knew what 'Hecate' was, and the Third Mizukage is talking about...

"An ancient weapon..." Haku muttered his thought aloud in realization. That was what the Third Mizukage was after!

Haku suddenly wasn't tired any more as his thoughts raced. Just where and how had the Mizukage even learned about Hecate? Apparently, the Third Mizukage wasn't ready with using this weapon, because he had called the people of Kiri 'keys' but how close was he?

Did this mean he had access to Hecate?

Haku had to talk to Zabuza-sama! His sudden jolt into a standing position startled Kimimaro.

"Haku-kun? Are you alright?"

"No..." Haku whispered. He shook his head, and spoke normally. "I don't know. Something's... I have to talk to Zabuza-sama... Excuse me."

Haku gave a short nod of his head before leaving, and Kimimaro just shrugged, grabbed one of the journals he had been reading and followed Haku out. He figured he would show Zoro some of what he had learned about the Kūhaku, plus, it would be better to take more of a break from all of this reading than he initially had.

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Outside, the two teens came upon an interesting scene. Zoro was currently sticking out of Zabuza, and it looked even more disturbing due to the fact that Zoro appeared to be flowing through the man, as if he were trying to pull himself through thick mud. The real Zabuza looked disturbed if not a little green. The clone released a violent scream and Zoro crashed to the ground with a wet-sounding plop, while the two youngest boys watched in morbid fascination.

"Dammit, I almost had it!" Zoro said as he pulled himself up. "I'm sure of it...I probably need to distribute more chakra to my feet and weapons..."

Zoro had been working at this particular Jutsu for a few hours now. While attempting his Clan's Jutsu, even though it was difficult, it came much easier than other things have during his childhood.

"One more time," Zoro said with a smirk.

Zabuza obliged with a water clone, and Zoro took his stance. Zabuza didn't really enjoy seeing himself get torn apart over and over, but he had to admit that Zoro has some crazy stamina.

Zoro took a deep breath for concentration, and let his chakra flow towards his feet and focused it on his swords. He then concentrated on Zabuza's clone, and stepped forward. The world around him swirled by, and Zoro focused on getting through the clone. It was all a matter of timing and chakra flow. As soon as Zoro made contact, he allowed his chakra to flow over him, and for a split second, the world went dark. He twisted with his swords to propel his momentum, pushing away as if he were jumping off of water, and suddenly he was outside again.

Zoro took heavy breaths, as he turned to look at the clone, who still stood intact. At first, Zoro was concerned that he had been wrong, but then the clone gasped and heaved as wounds appeared on its body before dispelling. It wasn't as clean as the scroll seemed to imply it should be, but it was a start.

"You did it, Zoro-nii!" Gaara cheered.

Naruto wasn't far behind. "That was so cool!"

"Maybe there'll be some thieves or something I can practice on..." Zoro said with his usual smirk. Zabuza could tell that Zoro was (sort of) joking. He didn't seem the type to pick a fight with some petty criminals just to test his skills.

"Impressive." Zabuza said. "Perhaps you should take a short break now. You've been at this for quite a while."

"Fine." Zoro muttered as he sat down with one the Kūhaku scrolls and looked over it, a frown on his features while he read.

Haku and Kimimaro chose this moment to let their presence be known, and Kimimaro showed Zoro the journal that had what was undeniably one of his direct ancestors.

"Wow, Zoro-nii..." Naruto grinned as he looked at the picture of Ryuuma, and he studied a drawing of Ikue on another page of the sketchbook that had been drawn by someone else. She had been a very pretty woman, in Naruto's opinion. "I know that they aren't your parents, but they're still your family..."

"Yeah, I guess..." Zoro replied quietly. He could see how he and this man from long ago were related, and the woman who was a long-gone grandmother from however many generations past looked as if she had been a pleasant person, someone that anyone really would have been very lucky to know. This was the first time he had ever seen what his relatives looked like, and it was rather surreal. It had been a long time since he thought about his birth-parents in a way that he wondered where they were and if they even cared that he was alive.

"They look happy." Gaara commented as he looked over more of the drawings, interrupting Zoro's musing.

"Yeah, I guess they do." Zoro agreed.

Kimimaro smiled at the three in front of him. "So, Zoro-san, how is

learning about your Clan's Kekkei Genkai coming along?"

"Headache inducing. But I'm getting the hang of it."

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Over with Haku and Zabuza, Haku looked very grim as he held onto one of the journals in a tight grip, with a few others tucked under his arm.

"Zabuza-sama, I think you should hear this," Haku said, his demeanor captured all of Zabuza's attention immediately.

Haku read the specific entries detailing Great Weapons and a country disappearing nearly 900 years ago, and the fact that the decision had been made to Seal Hecate away around 600 hundred years ago. Haku figured he would tell Zabuza more about the Clan later, but for now, this was information that he needed to know. Upon hearing the name 'Hecate' Zabuza's eyes widened and he sucked in a sharp breathe of air.

0*O*0*Flashback*0*O*0

A bloody Zabuza stood across from the Third Mizukage Arashi; thanking whatever deities were listening that these were only superficial wounds.

Mei stepped up besides Zabuza, looking weary, but still in good enough condition to fight.

"Sorry I'm late, Zabuza, I got held up."

Arashi spoke with an impassive tone before Zabuza could respond.

"Terumi Mei. So you have chosen to betray me as well. It's such a shame. You were a powerful Kunoichi. It's a shame your life will have to end here now so soon."

"We wouldn't even be here if you hadn't turned your back on your people!" Mei shot back, keeping her cool. Anyone with a lick of common sense knew that losing control of your emotions at times such as these was a guaranteed death sentence. Any distraction was an opening. "If you hadn't decided to purge our country of its Kekkei Genkai, then we wouldn't even be having this conversation!"

"I haven't turned my back on my people," the Mizukage stated. "I am doing this for the betterment of the world."

His detached voice sent shivers up and down both Zabuza and Mei's spines. His voice held no emotion or fluctuation.

"Then please," Mei grimaced. "Enlighten us."

"I am cleansing the world. These people aren't dying for nothing." His eyes drifted to the moon, as if he were seeing something they weren't. "They are merely keys for the greater good. A sacrifice, if you will."

The Mizukage's hands rapidly went through a series of hand-signs. "It's a shame that neither of you will be alive to see the change I intend to bring upon this world. Your blood will simply have to be added to the others' as a sacrifice for Hecate." His gaze landed specifically on Mei. "And your blood will do perfectly."

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It was worrying to Zabuza that Arashi had knowledge of whatever this weapon was, but he acted as if Hecate was alive, and not a thing. It was as if Arashi knew where Hecate was, but didn't have all the resources to actually use it.

"It's a shame that neither of you will be alive to see the change I intend to bring upon this world. Your blood will simply have to be added to the others' as a sacrifice for Hecate."

Did his wording mean anything? He had mentioned a blood sacrifice, and his focus had gone specifically to Mei, who had both a Lava Release and Boil Release Kekkei Genkai.

"I am cleansing the world. These people aren't dying for nothing."

His eyes drifted to the moon, as if he were seeing something they weren't.

"They are merely keys for the greater good. A sacrifice, if you will."

As Zabuza thought about it, an unnerving thought kept wriggling in the back of his mind. "What if he's going after Kekkei Genkai because that's what this thing needs?" Zabuza began pacing as he thought out loud. "But that doesn't seem to make sense, because they aren't taking the people or even the bodies anywhere. But if it's specifically the blood and the deaths he's looking for... dammit, I'm even *more* confused about this whole thing than I was before!"

A sacrifice often meant a ritual, but there didn't appear to be any of that. It was people raiding villages to slaughter Kekkei Genkai holders

simply to leave them dead and bleeding on the ground. There was no ritual here, just death and chaos. But he had called them 'keys' and there were so many implications that there was more to the Third Mizukage's motives than met the eye.

"Zabuza-sama...where would he have even learned of Hecate?"

"I don't know...and I'm starting to think that we don't have the luxury of waiting a few years to start another uprising."

Haku nodded in agreement. He looked down at the journals in his hands. They had been good people, in Haku's opinion, loyal and honorable to a fault – very un-Shinobi and un-Kiri-like in general. To him, it was saddening that they had lost these people to the Outside. Before, they had been the Kiri no Yuurei; stories to tell around campfires to try and see who would get spooked first – or maybe try and see who had heard the most ridiculous version of events surrounding the myths of the Kūhaku Clan.

But now, they were real people. They would have fought at the Revolutionary's side without question even if they didn't have a Kekkei Genkai. Haku sighed heavily as he looked at the journals in his arms, wondering what the Revolutionaries would do, and if they could stop Arashi from doing...whatever it was with Hecate in time.

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After taking some time to rest up, Zoro was attempting another one of his Clan's techniques, and was noticeably getting frustrated yet again. Kimimaro couldn't help but frown as he observed Zoro trying to do whatever the scroll said he had to do, and he was obviously failing. Upon seeing Zoro try and fail for the umpteenth time, Kimimaro finally spoke up.

"What exactly are you trying to do?"

Not exactly liking to have to ask for help, but not really having any choice on the matter, Zoro answered unsuredly, "This Jutsu requires some kind of... chakra pulse...?"

Kimimaro looked it over, reading the requirements for the Jutsu. From the looks of it, the Kūhaku would focus their chakra around themselves, building it up mainly around their heads. Afterwards, they'd do a sort of 'burst' or 'pulse' while focusing the built-up chakra on the moisture in the air, pushing and manipulating the chakra so that they would stay on the path they wanted, and take the proper

turns when required.

It was somewhat like how a bat would navigate itself around.

So essentially, it was a way for the Kūhaku to not get lost...that must have been a pretty serious problem if they had a Jutsu like this, Kimimaro surmised. There appeared to be aspects of the Jutsu that helped to identify where they were, along with using it to detect Gates, and also served as a focusing technique.

Kimimaro looked up at Zoro, who was scowling at the scroll as if it had offended him. Thinking back on what he had seen and heard about Zoro, it appeared that he had a difficult time focusing, and that he had entered one of those 'Gates' in Kiri only to suddenly find himself in the desert not even realizing it had happened until well after the fact, and he couldn't find his way back. This was a Jutsu to prevent that very thing from happening.

But something was clearly wrong.

Kimimaro observed as Zoro pooled the chakra like the scroll said he should, but it was as if that 'pulse' or whatever just wouldn't release. Zoro went so far as to try using an impressive version of *Kirigakure no Jutsu* and it still didn't work.

"I think I know what your problem is..." Kimimaro said after a moment of thought and observation. "When I looked at the family tree, everyone who was a Kūhaku by birth was always either a half-blood or full-blooded; with the half-blood's always marrying each other to have more 'pure-blood'. To put it simply; genetics."

"Genetics'." Zoro repeated flatly.

"Yes. Seeing how you're struggling here, I'd say that you're only a quarter Kūhaku. That's why Clans are so obsessed with keeping themselves 'pure', or at least having the members that marry into the Clan have complementary chakra elements. Plus, you have the genes from not only however many generations worth of Kūhaku and likely that of the people Outside." Kimimaro could only shrug. "It's possibly part of why you're having the struggles that you are. You have a natural tie to the Water Element thanks to your Kekkei Genkai, and Wind comes secondary due to the two Elements having certain correlations to each other, and your skill with swords definitely helps..."

"I noticed that the way your chakra looks and flows is different. Why

it's so different from that of a civilian who trained it up and other Shinobi."

It was true; upon closer inspection, Zoro's chakra had a slightly darker blue color to it than that of the others, and even fluctuated differently. Internalizing his chakra was easy enough, and using it for physical contact such as tree-climbing and water-walking was another simple task. But sending out a chakra pulse wasn't really an option, simply because he couldn't do it.

Zoro sighed heavily, accepting the fact. It wasn't too discouraging, and he had a few new sword techniques that were unique to him out there under his belt for when he finally accomplished his impossible dream. He didn't need to be able to send out 'chakra pulses' in order to become a great swordsman.

Maybe he could, but it would take quite a bit of ingenuity along with trial and error to make something slightly similar.

"It's alright, Zoro-nii..." Naruto's voice pulled Zoro out of his thoughts. The blond beamed up at him. "Me an' Gaara'll help you out to not get lost, Dattebayo."

Zoro snorted and gave Naruto a light flick on his forehead with a finger. "Sure you will, brat."

Naruto just grinned even more.

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When Zoro saw one of the Jutsu – he recognized from that time he had faced Juzo. "*Nurupasuu~ōkingu gijutsu...*" he muttered to himself, wondering if he could even do it. It was for the sole purpose of getting out of a situation when the user couldn't move. The Jutsu required the user to gather a layer of chakra around their body and then they needed to release a burst of chakra in a single direction. It was considered a very advanced technique, apparently. Again, this was a technique that required a burst of chakra, and from the description, passing out after its use wasn't supposed to happen.

But Zoro recalled that when he had used this Jutsu, he hadn't done that entire 'chakra layer' thing... it had been done in a desperate attempt to not die. He had just did it... what had been going on that caused him to do it? There had been a sword coming down on him, and he had felt the need to move, no matter what...

Zoro groaned and ran his hands over his face.

Haku noticed and approached with concern in his voice. "Are you alright?"

Zoro sighed for the umpteenth time and handed the scroll over to Haku. Haku looked it over, and then looked to Zoro for an explanation.

"I've done this before, but only once...and it wasn't anything like it's described here."

"Oh...would you mind telling me? Maybe I could offer some input?"

Zoro did his best to describe the last bit of his fight with Juzo, and then passing out soon afterwards.

Haku nodded, tapping his chin in thought.

"It's almost like a temporary state of hyper focus," Haku said after a moment of looking over the Jutsu again. "So you obviously need to be able to move so that your Kekkei Genkai can activate – and this is to get around that..." Haku muttered to himself. "It's a burst of chakra, but it's different for you...I think in your case, it only happens when you have a burst of adrenaline."

Zoro scowled, clearly frustrated. "So does that mean I can't do it like it says there?"

"...I don't know." Haku replied regretfully. "Kimimaro was telling me about how the Kūhaku functioned in terms of your Clan's for lack of a better word, "breeding process" went..."

"Yeah, he mentioned something about that..."

Haku bit his lip nervously before speaking. "Zoro-san, can I ask you something?"

"You just did."

"Ah, right...um, do you know anything about ancient weapons? Does the name Tequila Wolf mean anything to you?"

"What? No..." Zoro furrowed his brow. "Why?"

"Those things were mentioned as to why the barrier was changed to like it is now. It's all incredibly complicated... would you mind if

Zabuza-sama and I copied some of the entries from the journals? I wouldn't feel right taking them, knowing what they contain. If another Kūhaku descendant came here, they'd need to know this information."

"If you really want to..."

Haku bowed. "Thank you, Zoro-san."

"Uh...sure." Zoro honestly felt somewhat awkward, having someone bow to him like Haku was doing at that moment.

OoOoO

The following days consisted of Zabuza, Haku, Kimimaro, and Zoro making copies of the various journal entries, while Naruto and Gaara were able to help. Zoro had already read each of the scrolls, and had focused on the ones he believed would be most useful to him. He decided that he would leave behind the scrolls if another Kūhaku descendant somehow found their way to Kiri or whatever.

It was not long afterwards, that Zoro quickly and easily guided them out of the mist.

The area Zoro needed to head towards was a small island that was somewhere in between Kiri and another island that contained ruins. It happened that the Revolutionary's safe house was in the same general direction, and was on an island that bordered just off the coast of Kiri.

As they rowed their boat, Zabuza and Haku were already making plans for what they would do upon reuniting with their group, and since Kimimaro would be going with them, he offered an occasional comment here and there. Zabuza didn't do a very good job of hiding his concern as they discussed Hecate, and what Hecate could possibly be and where Arashi could have found out about such a powerful weapon.

Theories didn't do them much good, and if anything, simply raised their paranoia and stress levels.

The plan now was to have Zoro drop them off at their safe house and then he would leave.

But alas, not all plans would work out as they planned.

"What's that thing in the sky?"

Gaara pointed to a dark shape that was coming towards them; and it was rapidly getting bigger.

"Oh, shit..." Zabuza said the moment he could make out a giant Toad with figure that had wild white hair riding on top. "That's Jiraiya!"

Zoro let out his own string of curses and really wished he was anywhere but here. Thinking quickly, Zoro made a hand sign and focused his chakra and on the water around them.

"Kirigakure no Jutsu!"

The water around them sloshed and rose into the air, creating that thick curtain of mist and Zoro started rowing like a madman to widen the distance between them and the Toad Sage. The Kiri-Nin were looking at Zoro in mild awe as they were actually going fast enough to have the wind whip through their hair and make them have to use chakra to stay in their seats. Gaara and Naruto were clinging to the boat for dear life, although Naruto was grinning and Gaara was looking slightly green.

Meanwhile, Jiraiya was looking at the mist that surrounded him. It set him on edge, because he felt as if there were hundreds of tiny insect legs crawling on his exposed skin; and he could hear the noises around him, but they echoed in ways that made it near impossible to tell which direction they originated from.

"Huh...it's been a long while since I've seen this Jutsu..." Gamakabu muttered, before taking in a deep breath. Gamakabu released a blast of air, creating a temporary hole in the swirling mist and shot out of the cover as it was closing back up around them.

Jiraiya scanned the water, looking for any signs of a possible Genjutsu.

"There ain't no Genjutsu, kid." Gamakabu said, pointing. "They're further ahead. Hang on!"

Gamakabu ducked low and sent a burst of chakra through his legs and shot upwards as an angle towards their target, creating a small tidal wave. Jiraiya was looking at the small boat incredulously, wondering how in the world they were going so fast.

"He's coming after us again!" Haku shouted. Haku glanced down at the water, a plan forming in his mind. "Zoro-san! Can you manage another one of your *Kirigakure no Jutsu*?!"

Zoro stopped rowing, nearly sending everyone crashing to the bottom of the boat.

"Why aren't you hanging on?"

"Now's not the time to be asking that, Roronoa! Just do the Jutsu!" Zabuza shouted from his spot on the bottom of the boat as he nursed his forehead from where it had slammed into the boat.

"Kirigakure no Jutsu!"

The mist shot up around them again, and Haku looked back at Zoro, "Start rowing!"

Zoro complied, and Haku made a series of hand signs before thrusting his hands into the water. A wall of ice shot up around them, creating both a shield and a sort of weapon as spikes formed on the wall.

There was a large splash ahead of them, and another Toad was sitting there. It opened its mouth and oil shot out into the sea.

"He's going to attempt to trap us..." Kimimaro observed.

Sure enough, Jiraiya – or probably a clone – set the oil on fire, effectively trapping them. Behind them there was a crash, and yelling. But the ice wall not surprisingly, didn't even slow Jiraiya down.

"Roronoa Zoro, you have no idea how much trouble you've caused us. I'll be taking you and Naruto both back to Konoha." Jiraiya said, from atop his oil-spewing Toad. His eyes fell on Zabuza. "And to think, the rumors of you associating with Kiri's usurpers was true."

The real Jiraiya riding Gamakubo showed up, and he scowled. There was Naruto and Zoro, along with Zabuza along with two other teenagers and a... Jiraiya narrowed his eyes. That kid *had* to be the Kazekage's son – the one everyone claimed had been killed. What was Zoro doing with this kid too?

"Look, how about this. I'll overlook the fact you went and partnered up with this guy," Jiraiya jabbed a thumb at Zabuza, who glared. "If you'll come with me quietly. You'll either return to Konoha alive to face trial or as a corpse. Your choice, kid."

Zoro scowled, wondering what he was going to do. How was he going to get out of this? Was fighting this guy even an option? Zabuza had been concerned – but maybe he wasn't up to the challenge that Zoro

was seriously considering taking on.

But Zoro's thoughts were cut off when Naruto began glowing red. Naruto was snarling, and his crimson-red eyes fixed on Jiraiya.

"I won't let you take Zoro-nii..."

Naruto shot out of the boat, nearly cracking it in half. At first, the boat seemed fine, but a minute later the others quickly scrambled out of the boat when they felt water pooling around their feet. Gaara gripped Zoro in worry, wondering what they were going to do. Everyone stood on the water, trying to come up with some sort of plan that would result in them coming out of this alive.

Would they have to fight? Could they even win?

Naruto raced up the side of the Toad Summons, and directed his fury at Jiraiya. *"I'm **not going back** to Konoha! You **can't make me!**"*

Jiraiya dodged, narrowly avoiding getting his stomach ripped out. He frowned in concern. Why was Naruto bringing out the Kyuubi's chakra for the sake of Zoro? He kept having to dodge, and Jiraiya found that Naruto wasn't just swiping at him haphazardly. The kid was actually fighting strategically.

Jiraiya was kept on the defense, searching for an opening – he winced when Naruto's fingertips ripped through his shoulder.

That was when he heard a voice shouting, "Naruto, *stop!*"

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Just a bit earlier, Zoro was watching Naruto scale up the Toad and then attempt to attack Jiraiya. All Zoro could see was ripped up bodies and a kid who was terrified out of his mind at losing the people he cared about. The mangled form of Jiraiya with a bloody Naruto standing over the corpse crossed his mind. Or...what if Jiraiya did something to the kid?

Zoro started running towards the Toad that had Naruto attacking Jiraiya. He shifted Gaara who was clinging to his back, making sure that the kid held on.

"Naruto, stop!"

Zoro focused, and made sure to cover Gaara with a layer of chakra as

well, and within seconds, he was next to Naruto, and Jiraiya. The man had glowing fingertips with various symbols on them, and Zoro ripped the blond away just before Jiraiya could slam his hand into Naruto's abdomen.

Naruto writhed and snarled in Zoro's grip. Zoro was about to do something really stupid, and he knew it. Hopefully, it would get Jiraiya to stop and listen or something.

"Damn brat, cut it out *now!*" Zoro ordered, gripping Naruto's shoulders. He put Gaara down and turned his back on Jiraiya.

"I won't let him take you away from me!" Naruto snarled, trying to get away. ***"I won't let him kill you!"***

Zoro smirked. "Damn brat...you really think I'll let myself die here?"

Slowly, Naruto's eyes faded to blue as he looked up at Zoro. Naruto was crying, and he slowly shook his head.

Gaara glared at Jiraiya, who was standing back nearly slack-jawed. How on earth... normally, it would take various Seals or even the First Hokage's Kekkei Genkai...but this kid...he had only spoken a few words and Naruto was calm. The fact that Zoro had even turned his back on him either spoke levels of his confidence or his stupidity.

But Zoro slowly turned to face him. Naruto ducked behind Zoro, and it honestly pained Jiraiya that Naruto – his godson – was looking at him with fear and even anger.

"Listen." Zoro said, looking up at Jiraiya. "Naruto can't go back to Konoha."

Of all the things Jiraiya expected to hear, that certainly wasn't it.

Chapter End Notes

My messily handwritten notes for this chapter literally consisted of this when I got a sudden brainstorm:

Bridge-

Tequila Wolf

Gate

600 year (But 'year' looks more like 'yar')

Worry about being found

SHUT OUT

Poneglyphs

Worry

Jiraiya Makes a Difficult Decision that not many will like. He's the Legendary Toad Sage – Too Bad!

Chapter Summary

Jiraiya hates being the bad guy here; but he has to make a decision. Blue eyes that are far too much like Kushina's and a hurt, desperate expression that mirrors Minato look up at him. He reasons he did the right thing back then, leaving Naruto behind. When Zoro tells him of a difficult truth and dangerous plots, it isn't something he wants to believe. Regret means looking back, unable to go forward. A single decision is made, and the world slowly begins to shift.

Chapter Notes

I must thank you for coming this far and sticking with it. Those emails are like a hot drink on a cold day.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Zoro slowly turned to face him. Naruto ducked behind Zoro, and it honestly pained Jiraiya that Naruto – his godson – was looking at him with fear and even anger.

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Jiraiya raised a brow, and when the other Kiri-Nin joined them on top of the Toad, they obviously were ready to attack. But for now, they kept their distance, observing the scene carefully, waiting to see what everyone would do.

"What?"

"I said 'Naruto can't go back to Konoha.'" Zoro said, now pulling the redheaded boy so that the teen was between him and Jiraiya. He turned so that he was facing the Toad Sage, but he ran hand through the redhead's hair. "It'll be alright, sand-brat. We're just talking, got

it?"

The boy looked up at Zoro in a way that made Jiraiya feel as if he was observing how a younger sibling would view an older one. It was a mildly surreal scene. The boy silently nodded, but he did give Jiraiya another glare.

"I don't think you're the one who gets to decide that." Jiraiya replied, not bothering to mask his irritation. "You kidnapped a kid from Konoha – one who is extremely important-"

"Bullshit."

Zoro spat the word as he glared back at him. The sudden shift in hostility put Jiraiya even more on edge.

"Excuse me?"

"You wanna to take Naruto back to Konoha? Do you know or even care how he was being treated?"

The blond in question ducked behind Zoro again, looking worried.

Jiraiya was about to retort, when the Toad below them interrupted.

"Oi, Jiraiya!" the Toad they were standing on called out. "Sorry, but my time's running short, so you should get down now. Unless you wanna fall a few hundred feet."

Zoro stood up and grabbed the two boys, and then walked over to the Kiri-Nin, saying, "Hang on."

Before Jiraiya could say or do anything, they were gone, as if they had faded out. The Toad Sage balked, seeing what a Kūhaku could do. At first, Jiraiya thought that they had run, but he saw the small group on one of the islands further down, and they weren't making any attempts to escape. Sighing heavily, Jiraiya made his way down to the others while his Toads both disappeared.

Down below, Zoro swayed, feeling lightheaded. He hadn't teleported that many people before, and he collapsed to the ground. He seriously wished he had a drink right then. Afterwards, he could then take a nap.

Jiraiya made his way towards the group, a thoughtful look on his face. He scowled at Zoro, saying, "You and me have to talk, *now*."

Zoro stood up, and Naruto grabbed a fistful of his shirt.

"Zoro-nii..." Naruto looked scared, and Gaara wasn't any better because he had Zoro's arm in a vice grip tight enough that if Zoro had been anyone else, his arm would probably have been broken.

"You two stay here with Tape-Face and the others, got it, brats?"

Zoro pulled away from Gaara, while Naruto glanced around Zoro towards Jiraiya with a mistrustful glare. Unexpectedly, Naruto bolted forward before anyone could react and stood in front of Jiraiya with a defiant look on his face. Jiraiya blinked, looking down at the kid.

Naruto then kicked Jiraiya in the shin, causing the man to hop around on one leg while he held onto the one the boy had struck. The thing was, Jiraiya wasn't necessarily faking. That kick had hurt – at least a little; it would more than certainly bruise. Jiraiya paused when Naruto started speaking to him.

"I *hate* you!" Naruto started shouting, his fists clenched tightly. "I wanna become an awesome Ninja before returning to Konoha! I *like* being with Zoro-nii!"

Naruto's shoulders sagged, and he held back tears as he looked up at Jiraiya. "I'm happy, being with Zoro-nii and Gaara...why are you trying to take me away from my family, 'ttebayou?"

Jiraiya looked at Naruto, feeling somewhat guilty. Of course, that was how the kid would see it. But then, the tears started to fall, as Naruto didn't bother to hold them back anymore.

"No-one at the orphanage wanted me. They said I was dangerous and a monster and kicked me out. I was always alone...no-one wanted me around." Naruto stared at the ground. "But, during the festival that always happens on my birthday... a man grabbed me and I couldn't breathe. That was when Zoro-nii beat him up and he was really cool, 'ttebayou."

Naruto sniffed loudly as he continued. "Zoro-nii's the only one who's ever wanted me. He bought me new clothes and this sword. He always gives me food when I'm hungry. Zoro-nii gets lost without me or Gaara there. He's also scary when he trains, but he's showing me how to fight, 'ttebayou..."

Blue eyes that were far too much like Kushina's and a hurt, desperate expression that mirrored Minato's looked up at Jiraiya.

"Why do I have to go back to Konoha? Why can't I stay with my family, 'ttebayou?"

Jiraiya looked down at the boy, an unpleasant feeling was building in his heart and throat. Jiraiya was aware that Zoro had saved Naruto from some drunken idiot that night, and he knew that there had been various issues with the orphanage, but this... this made Jiraiya feel as if he were the bad guy in all this.

He almost didn't notice Zoro moving.

Slowly, Zoro moved forward and squatted down next to Naruto, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Oi, brat. Look at me."

The Toad Sage was quick to notice that 'brat' wasn't being used in a derogatory way.

Naruto turned to look at Zoro with a crushed expression. Zoro smirked, and was about to say something, when Naruto suddenly enveloped him in a tight hug. "You aren't gonna let him take me away, are you Zoro-nii?"

Instead of responding, Zoro pulled away. Looking very serious, Zoro took Wado Ichimonji out from his haramaki and handed the sword to Naruto. "Take care of this for me for a bit, okay, brat?"

Naruto pulled the sword close, as if it were going to float away. This was Zoro's precious sword – the one that belonged to his friend – and the one he always made promises on. Naruto nodded seriously, not meeting Zoro's eyes. He felt Zoro ruffle his hair again.

"Go stand over with Tape-Face and the others."

There were still tears running down his face, but Naruto silently nodded and complied.

Once Naruto was over with the others, Zoro put a hand on one of his two remaining swords and outright glared at Jiraiya. Jiraiya actually felt as if he were looking at a cornered beast and not a teenager.

Zoro wasn't yelling, and the odd, quietness to his voice made him unnerving. "Do you even care about what happens to Naruto, or is this just about the Kyuubi?"

Jiraiya didn't get a chance to respond, because Zoro continued, "Are you gonna make sure that he gets food every day, or at least have one

of those ANBU guys make sure that no-one gangs up on him?"

Zoro really did care about the brat. The kid had no-one. Zoro wanted to say something snarky, but instead, he continued to glare.

"Things are complicated, kid." Jiraiya replied tiredly. "So tell me: why can't Naruto return to Konoha?"

"Because that Fugaku guy is planning to use the Kyuubi to attack Konoha."

Jiraiya looked at Zoro who had just said that sentence with a straight face.

"You could be lying about Fugaku." Jiraiya said, crossing his arms. But something in Jiraiya's gut told him that Zoro wasn't lying. The few times Jiraiya had seen Fugaku throughout the last few years, there was *something* about him that seemed strangely off, and he could never exactly place it. He knew that after the Kyuubi's attack, that the Uchiha Police hadn't really been the same in view of the public, and so Jiraiya had assumed, well, more like hoped it had something to do with that.

"Look..." Zoro said nonchalantly after a moment or two. "It was an Uchiha who asked me to look after the kid. I promised I would."

Jiraiya's frown deepened, realizing what that meant. If there was inner conflict with the Uchiha... there were a few hundred Uchiha. This was treason in more ways than one. It would be near impossible to figure out which one was responsible for this whole ordeal if Zoro wouldn't give him a name.

"Why would an Uchiha want *you* of all people to look after Naruto? Who was this, and why wouldn't they just go along with Fugaku's plan?"

"Well..." Zoro said thoughtfully, as he scratched his cheek. "They had black hair and annoying red eyes." The teen continued onto the other questions as if he had just described the mysterious Uchiha in the most helpful way possible, "Because I'll be impossible to find and follow once I leave. If Naruto goes back, the Uchiha will all be killed. Some bandaged-burn victim guy named Danzo figures that if Naruto's in Konoha, then the Uchiha aren't needed, or whatever. There's enough balance of power or something like that."

"'Bandaged-burn victim'...?" Jiraiya pinched the bridge of his nose. It

appeared that Danzo was still up to his old schemes. His sensei for a long while had suspected that Danzo was planning something, but this... if Zoro was telling the truth that meant that Danzo was more than willing to throw away *hundreds* of lives. Danzo's beliefs had often differed from Hiruzen's, but this was beyond what Jiraiya had initially presumed of the man.

Glancing uneasily over at the Kiri-Nin who were standing a distance away and talking among themselves, Jiraiya had to ask.

"Did you reveal any of this to the Kiri-Nin?"

"I'm not Konoha-Nin or Kiri-Nin, so I'm not breaking anyone's rules." Zoro huffed irritably.

"You still shouldn't be revealing stuff like this to people."

Zoro scowled at Jiraiya, and simply to mess with the guy, Zoro blatantly lied, saying, "Well, I already told 'em plenty. They know Gaara and Naruto are Jinchuuriki."

Well – it was partially true.

Jiraiya scowled at Zoro disapprovingly.

"But *still*, this is extremely sensitive information." Jiraiya replied with an annoyed scowl at the teen. "Where's your other associate, by the way?"

Zoro just gave Jiraiya a blank look, which annoyed the man.

"He's a guy around your age, this high with dark eyes and black hair. Goes by the name of 'Gin'."

At first, Jiraiya was wondering if Gaara had somehow passed for Gin, because of the description he had been given back at the inn.

Of course, Zoro didn't know what Jiraiya did, and was thinking of Kakashi's alternate ego of 'Gin'. So he was being perfectly honest when he replied with,

"We split up back in Fire Country."

"Alright fine," Jiraiya said, figuring he would grill Zoro later about 'Gin'. Or maybe T&I would. It all depended on if Zoro cooperated. Unless Jiraiya had to resort to killing him.

There was an uncomfortable silence between them, but Zoro broke it by asking, "Did you know I saw him get kicked out of a store? The bastard accused him of stealing, even though the brat had money. That night, when some dumbass was choking him, people saw what was happening, and they didn't do shit." Zoro looked at Jiraiya. "Are you gonna to protect him from Fugaku? What about Burn-Victim?"

Jiraiya didn't respond, so Zoro continued. "I promised I'd look after him. He's got no-one else."

Jiraiya felt as if he had been punched in the gut. There were painful truths laced throughout Zoro's words. He *did* care, but things were complicated. There were quite a few things that happened that night so long ago, and Jiraiya had had no choice but to leave Konoha, and Naruto behind.

Ignoring the fact that Zoro just revealed which Biju he was hosting to the Kiri-Nin, there might have been some truth there. But this was also about Naruto, and getting him back to where he belonged. But... Jiraiya looked over at Naruto; blond hair and blue eyes, looking so much like Minato and Kushina that it was almost like that kunai to the gut twisted the wound.

Taking Naruto away from Zoro – or rather taking Zoro away from Naruto – it was almost like a cruel, morbid joke. Like tricking a kid into thinking that they have a family only to rip the rug out from under them.

He thought of Naruto looking up at him, with tears in his eyes, and the way Zoro got the Kyuubi half of the boy to calm down *somehow*. That honestly didn't make any sense, but it had happened. If he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have believed it. Jiraiya thought about the interactions he had seen between Zoro, Naruto, and Gaara: Zoro putting himself in between the boys and the potential threat. The way Zoro ruffled the boys' hair, and the way both of them looked up at Zoro.

There was obviously something special about that white-sheathed sword; because when Zoro handed it over to Naruto, there was a shift in the boy. Like he was tasked to hold onto something sacred.

While Jiraiya had been told some of what had been going on with Naruto, and what had happened at the festival... He glanced over at Naruto, and took in the boy's appearance. He was still thin, but had filled out. His clothing while clearly used, was of good quality. His

shoes were a little too big for him, but they still looked fairly new. He had both a short sword and a kusarigama in his possession.

The words that Naruto had said to him just moments earlier were just salt to the wound.

Zoro, a complete stranger; a wandering kid; had taken more care of Naruto in a few months than the village had during the eight years Naruto had lived there.

But then, there were the factors of Fugaku and Danzo; two people that Jiraiya knew to be wary of. Hiruzen had tasked him to keep an eye on them when and where he could, but both men were shrewd enough to keep their hands just clean enough to not garner enough suspicion to warrant an all-out expulsion.

A thought entered Jiraiya's mind: would it be so wrong to let Naruto stay with Zoro?

"Roronoa Zoro...tell me: how could you possibly hide from the likes of Fugaku and Danzo?"

Both of them were well-connected, and Jiraiya would even go so far as to say that Danzo had more influence than Fugaku did.

"I'm not planning to stay in the Elemental Nations."

"What...what are you talking about?"

Zoro smirked. "There's a fog barrier surrounding the entire Elemental Nations. Idiots get lost in the fog; when it's actually pretty easy to navigate."

For some reason, both Zabuza and Haku found themselves inexplicably wanting to yell at Zoro, while Kimimaro felt like a facepalm was in order.

"Show me."

"Huh?" Zoro looked at Jiraiya with a slightly perplexed expression.

"I'm still considering whether or not to believe you about this whole thing involving Naruto." That was a weak excuse in Jiraiya's opinion. He honestly wanted time to think. "I want to see this 'barrier' that you're talking about."

"On the condition they come too." Zoro said, nodding to Zabuza and

the others. He figured it would help them out somehow, and seeing the forest for themselves would help put things into perspective for when they returned to that Mei lady and the others. "It would really help 'em out."

"Fine." Jiraiya said, although he was wary. He was confident enough that if any of them tried anything, he could easily fight each of them off. Besides, that little altercation earlier was simply a tame preview of his fighting prowess. But he'd still have to be cautious.

Both of them made their way over to where the others were standing, and several pairs of suspicious eyes landed on Jiraiya.

"We're going into the barrier, and all of you coming." Zoro stated candidly, before anyone could ask questions. "The old man here wants to see it for himself."

"Old man?" Jiraiya questioned. He wasn't *that* old.

"We also kinda need a boat." Zoro's gaze went to Naruto, who looked sheepish. "Our last one was broken."

Jiraiya was one to always be prepared, and so he had a boat Sealed away just in case of emergency. Luckily, the boat was big enough to fit all of them, and they climbed in.

Without a word, Zabuza immediately took over rowing.

"Shouldn't Zoro here be the one rowing?" Jiraiya asked, and he blinked as three Kiri-Nin and two children looked at him as if he were an idiot.

"The guy's a directionless idiot." Zabuza said flatly.

"Zoro-nii gets lost too easily." Naruto replied.

"He needs someone to be there so he won't wander off to be lost forever..." Gaara said in a way that garnered sympathy.

Zoro laughed in the fakest way possible before whacking both Naruto and Gaara over the head, causing the boat to rock.

"Stop messing around you three!" Zabuza yelled, but went ignored.

"*I don't* get lost you idiots!" Zoro glared. "I told you dumbasses before; the stupid paths *move*." Zoro smirked as he smugly asked, "Besides, who's the one who navigated us through the fog?"

"You're the only one who can say that!" the three Kiri-Nin found themselves shouting, their wild movements causing the boat to rock even more.

Naruto started laughing, while Gaara smiled as well.

Zabuza just muttered tiredly, while both Haku and Kimimaro just looked at Zoro in subjective horror at the strange, compelling feeling that had come over them momentarily.

Jiraiya observed the scene with a mix of curiosity and confusion. It was as if a momentary lapse of sense happened, and only the Kiri-Nin were aware of it.

"What the hell."

"If you hang around Roronoa long enough, you get used to it...kind of."

They rode in silence that Jiraiya was pretty sure was only awkward for him. As they rowed, Jiraiya had to ask, "So how'd you end up with the Kazekage's son? I heard he was dead."

"*You're* the Kazekage's son?" Haku looked at Gaara in surprise.

Now Jiraiya observed, because that response meant that there were things Zoro *hadn't* told the Kiri-Nin. Now, he wondered if Zoro had lied to him about what he had told the Kiri-Nin. As to why he had done it, Jiraiya couldn't be sure. But the few things that seemed to be true were the matters of Danzo and Fugaku.

Gaara became nervous and began fidgeting with the hem of his coat. "He...my...father...tried to kill me...but my uncle...told me to go with Zoro-nii..." Gaara then glared at Jiraiya as if he were an animal cornered in a cage. "If you take Zoro-nii away from me, I'll kill you."

Zoro snorted, and ruffled Gaara's hair. "Try not to look so cute when you make threats, sand-brat."

Gaara glared at Zoro, but it wasn't hostile – rather, there was a light blush on Gaara's cheeks, and the boy was only slightly annoyed.

The other occupants of the boat save Naruto and Kimimaro, all sweat-dropped, wondering what about Gaara's expression and threat Zoro considered 'cute'. Relief was on Haku and Zabuza's minds as they felt mildly comforted at the thought of Gaara threatening someone else.

While Zabuza thought that *maybe* Gaara liked him and Haku well enough, simply because the boy hadn't directed any dark glares or violent threats at them for nearly a week.

Jiraiya sighed, something he seemed to be doing a lot of within the last twenty minutes. This kid had attached himself to Zoro at the hip, and he had heard through his network about Rasa and his treatment of his own children; especially that of his youngest son. Under different circumstances, Konoha would be legally obligated to return Gaara – but knowing that there had been an attempt on his life – the life of a child – Hiruzen would never allow it.

But Konoha and Suna had a peaceful enough partnership that Rasa could visit Konoha for some kind of political meeting. If he were to see his son there, Rasa would legally have every right revoke any partnership Suna and Konoha had – and even go to war if they didn't return his son. That would result in interference from the civilian side of the Council, who likely would vote to return Gaara to avoid war altogether.

Dammit...Jiraiya scratched his head. Things were becoming increasingly difficult, and when he glanced over at Naruto, he caught the boy staring at him; mistrust and an underlying hint of fear. His own godson was scared of him, and it bothered him.

Before long, they reached a wall of mist – it was here that every instinct in everyone but Zoro made them want to turn back. It was as if they were knowingly walking off a cliff without a backup plan on how to land safely. Zabuza handed the oars off to Zoro, who suddenly had a look of concentration on his face. Before, it was an expression of boredom and annoyance; but now, it was as if Zoro was one of the Inuzuka's hounds on a scent trail.

Zoro didn't seem concerned, and he continued to row forward, not really caring about the mist or anyone else's personal feelings on the matter. They rowed through an archway that suddenly appeared – it honestly didn't seem like it had been there the whole time, and Jiraiya immediately noticed the numerous intricate Seals layered over the structure.

There were innumerable Genjutsu Seals with the sole purpose of making sure that the mist would stay active and that the archway would be ignored. In fact, the longer Jiraiya stared at the Seals, his vision began to swim as if he had spun around in place while drunk. Jiraiya briefly looked away and then back to the archway, but it was

like the archway was moving; bouncing up and down and back and forth, gliding away from him. He couldn't focus on it, and he began to feel nauseated.

"It's happening to you too, huh?" Zabuza asked when he saw Jiraiya looking equally ill. This was a disconcerting place.

"Umph..." Jiraiya grunted in response.

The mist was becoming thicker still; it was like being pulled through molasses before they broke through – into more mist. But this time, they were surrounded by a forest of tall pillars that were several hundred feet high. Thick ropes and chains lined the pillars, and none of the Shinobi had ever seen ropes or chains that thick before; Zabuza didn't think he could even reach his arms around the ropes in their entirety. Not without creating three or four clones so that they could just barely touch their fingertips together and circle around the ropes that way.

There were hundreds – *thousands* of Seals; layers upon layers of them on the pillars. Not only that, the Shinobi looked at the various shipwrecks surrounding them. The Kiri-Nin recognized several fishing ships from various countries that had crashed into the pillars, and there were even oddly designed ships of various sizes and styles with worn black flags and stylized skulls.

The sight of skeletons on board the other ships was a grim reminder that the place was a graveyard. There had to be hundreds of people here; and they were only seeing a fraction.

"Stop here." Jiraiya directed, and he went to climb one of the pillars, and sent chakra into his feet for when he wanted to climb on stone, but slipped the moment he made contact. Jiraiya barely avoided falling in the water, thanks to Zabuza and Haku who both quickly grabbed him and pulled him back into the boat.

"What the...?" Jiraiya sent a flow of chakra into his hand, and tested the stone. "This is...unusual."

Looking at the others, Jiraiya explained the absurd anomaly, "This is the same chakra output we'd use if we were walking on water."

"Water-walking on *stone*?" Haku asked, brow furrowed.

"Don't look at me, I have no idea." Zoro retorted when everyone looked at him.

Jiraiya carefully climbed out, and stuck to the pillar as he studied the Seals. Looking at them, it was evident that the Seals were there to keep the mist drawn in; others were for causing confusion and misdirection. But the Seals on top of the other ones... Jiraiya frowned. The Seals that were underneath were supposed to cause a person to enter the mist and simply come out again from where they had entered; but the newer ones... with these, there was absolutely no way anyone was getting out...unless... Jiraiya glanced at Zoro out of the corner of his eye. Unless they had a Kūhaku.

There was an uneasiness in the Shinobi that made them want to turn back, even though common sense was telling them that it was impossible. There was a sense of almost-panic, but truthfully because Zoro was there, there was no need. But still, that uneasiness made them want to run and get out of this place.

Their small group went from pillar to pillar, with Jiraiya finding increasingly complicated Seals. "This is amazing. This is truly impressive work..." Jiraiya had to admit. "These Seals...you know the Fourth Hokage's signature Jutsu?"

While Zabuza, Haku and even Kimimaro nodded, Jiraiya received blank looks from Zoro and Gaara.

"You mean my dad?"

"Wait, the Fourth Hokage is your old man?" Zabuza was looking at Naruto in disbelief. The Kiri-Nin almost burst out in disbelieving laughter. Zoro had the brats of *two* different Kages' in his care! It was like the start of a bad joke.

Jiraiya wanted to sigh *yet again*, because yet another Konoha secret had been revealed – this time, unwittingly by him. But that simple exchange proved that someone had been working with Zoro, leaving Jiraiya to wonder which of the Uchiha it was even more.

"Anyway," Jiraiya said, getting back to the point. "The Fourth Hokage had a signature Jutsu called, *Hiraishin no Jutsu*. It allowed him to teleport in an instant. You could almost say that his Jutsu was derived from *this*."

"These Seals are..." Jiraiya tried to think of how to describe it. "They are incredibly advanced and intricate. I mean..." Jiraiya trailed off to think of the right word for what he wanted to say. "This is *art*. Seal Masters like myself train for literal *years* to be able to pull stuff like *this* off." Jiraiya was starting to get excited. "Just about every one

of these Seals are all lost techniques! I can't believe I'm actually seeing this! It would likely take me months, maybe even years to fully decipher *all* them." Wistfully, the Toad Sage admired the Seals. "It's a shame that all of this was lost."

Jiraiya was busy admiring all the Seal Work around them, as this was clearly the work of the Uzumaki Clan, when he looked over at another one of the Seals on another pillar that had a mix of ropes and chains that went on to disappear into the mist, being connected elsewhere.

Jiraiya frowned when he saw it. "Roronoa-kun, take us over to that one."

Zoro complied, and Jiraiya quickly climbed out to study the Seals. His frown deepened when he read the script the main Seal contained. From what he could tell, this was one of the more advanced Seals – in fact, it was a Lock Seal, and it required the chakra from the Gobi. Not only that, the Seal could only be deactivated at the same time as the other Bijū released their chakra, while in their pure forms. But the 'pure' portion of the script was slightly off. Jiraiya looked at the script a little more carefully. There was something about Humans and keys... having a synergetic relationship with each other... Oh. *Oh*... Jiraiya put a hand to his chin.

If he were correct in his thinking, somewhere along within this forest was eight more of those Lock Seals. This would mean that say, Naruto for example, would have to have access to the Kyuubi's chakra freely – having a synergetic relationship with the Kyuubi, and be able to obtain all nine tails without going berserk. But would that even be possible? To his knowledge, none of the previous hosts had been able to get beyond five tails – only Kushina had been able achieve six, if only temporarily, and even then that had always been a risky ploy.

In his personal experience with the Kyuubi, the Bijū was always antagonistic towards its host.

"Zoro." Jiraiya climbed back into the boat. "Would you mind taking us out on the other side?"

Zoro just nodded, "Sure."

He rowed until they reached a point in the fog between a Seal-covered archway that began to feel as if they were being pulled back and pushed through at the same time, and a few seconds later was when the scenery around them changed. They were still surrounded by fog, but they were in the middle of a lake on a small island. The lake had a

small river that led out to the ocean, which was impressive; even from what they could see.

A huge sea creature that looked like a cross between a flamingo and a snake rose out of the water several miles away, and dove back in.

"What was *that*?" Kimimaro asked in awe.

"That was just a Sea King." Zoro answered easily, not even thinking about the shock that someone who had never even seen or heard of a 'Sea King' for that matter would likely go through. "It was actually one of the smaller ones."

"*That's* considered *small*?" Kimimaro responded, wondering how big these Sea Kings could get.

Both Jiraiya and Zabuza stared, because that 'Sea King' was roughly the size of a C-Class Summoning. So things that big was normal?

"I've heard from sensei that they can get around a few hundred to a few thousand feet long." Zoro replied offhandedly.

Jiraiya glanced at the two boys, who were staring at the sea creature in awe, and he sighed heavily once more, knowing what he was about to do would cause quite a bit of an uproar once he returned to Konoha. He guiltily glanced over at Naruto, who was chatting excitedly with Gaara over that flamingo-beast. The redhead was looking at Naruto with wide eyes and nodding, a small, shy smile on his face.

If only Jiraiya had stayed behind in Konoha, then surely they wouldn't be where they were right now. They were in between a rock and a hard place, and in that middle ground was this bizarre reality that Jiraiya of all people failed to put words to. The Toad Sage wondered about what Zoro had told him; Naruto getting kicked out of stores, getting beat up. It wasn't really surprising, but what was surprising was the fact that it had happened in Konoha. At least, a part of Jiraiya wanted it to be. He was aware of the laws his sensei had made. But they hadn't really helped, had they?

So, Jiraiya formed a plan, and he didn't even know if it would work, but it was worth a shot.

"You might as well take us back, then." Jiraiya said, and Zoro silently nodded, making his way back into the Gate. "This is a serious headache. I have no idea how I'm going to explain this to the Hokage,

on top of telling him about you three..." Jiraiya indicated the Kiri-Nin. "Plus, you've got the Kazekage's brat."

The second time going in wasn't so bad.

"Why don't you team up with Kiri?"

Everyone paused and looked at Gaara, who looked confused at the expressions everyone was giving him.

"Well...I mean," Gaara started nervously, twiddling his fingers as he looked down at his lap. "I-I don't understand ev-everything, but Kiri's in a lot of trouble, and Zabu-jii was talking about how his friend Mei wants peace and for the war his country's involved in to stop, and people are dying, and he's sad.

"...so if your village and Kiri worked together, would-wouldn't that help everyone?" Gaara looked up at Jiraiya with those big, green eyes of his. "They already know stuff about us...and the barrier-thing, right?"

"Kid," Jiraiya sighed. "...It's complicated."

He was about to try and explain the concept of war and politics to an eight-year-old when Zabuza jumped on the chance to team up with Konoha.

"There's important information about the Elemental Nations we'd be willing to share if you teamed up with us. I'll have to talk to Mei, first. But if she agrees, how about we pick a time and you pick a place?"

There would certainly be benefits in having allies in Kiri, Jiraiya had to admit. Hiruzen had said that he wanted to avoid going to war if they could help it, but it was clear that the Kiri-Nin were desperate if *Zabuza* was agreeing with the team-up. He wasn't sure how much more he could spring on Hiruzen in one day, but Jiraiya knew that these decisions weren't going to come lightly and they would have to be accepted due to his better judgment.

"Another thing," Zoro now piped up. "Kimimaro here needs a healer. So some bigshot like you's bound to know one or two, right?"

Jiraiya glanced at the pale kid and then to Zoro, who had stopped rowing. "I might know one..." Wait. Jiraiya looked around. "Why aren't we moving?"

Zoro smirked. "Well...I'm kinda tired, so I'll nap while you and Tape-Face have a conversation on what you're gonna do about the war in Kiri and all."

Just like that, Zoro settled down to sleep and was snoring within seconds.

"How can anyone fall asleep that fast?" Jiraiya wondered aloud. "Are you even asleep?"

"Let's make a deal, Toad Sage." Zabuza muttered. "We might as well, otherwise we'll likely never get moving."

At Jiraiya's look, Zabuza replied, "I spent around a week-and-a-half with this kid. He's a crazy, stubborn ass who can be a thorn in your side and a headache all in one; and we have no choice but to go on his terms. This is actually the first time I don't mind."

"Agreed, Zabuza-sama." Haku said with a smile.

"I think you should talk with Zabuza-san," Kimimaro offered his input. "Zoro-san was exhausted before coming here, so we should give him ample time to rest."

Naruto was glaring at Jiraiya from his spot besides Zoro, and Gaara glared at him as he positioned himself in between Zoro and Jiraiya, as if the old man would actually attack them. While the glare wasn't as intense, Gaara remained suspicious.

Sighing heavily and crossing his arms, Jiraiya rubbed his temples for a brief moment before asking, "So what exactly is going on with Kiri? I know that the Fourth Mizukage is ordering blood purges on Kekkei Genkai users, and there seems to be something else he's up to, but my sources could never figure out what it was."

"He's crazy...or at least that's what I thought." Zabuza replied. "He might not be as insane as we first assumed, but his reasoning doesn't make much sense either. He worships the moon, or at least I think he does."

"...and you're not gonna tell me anything beyond that unless I agree to have our Kage's meet up."

"Sounds like a plan."

Jiraiya sighed again, before Summoning a small Toad, who looked at

the scenery around them in awe before turning to Jiraiya. "Hey, Jiraiya!"

"I have a message for the Hokage." Jiraiya said as he swiftly wrote something down on a scroll. He showed the message to Zabuza, proving that he was simply requesting a meeting between the two Kages, and the other details could be sorted out later. Zabuza nodded, and then the Kiri-Nin proceeded to Summon a large, blue, fire-bellied Newt.

"Oh, hey! Zabuza!" The Newt grinned at his Summoner as he peered over a pair of black sunglasses.

Nodding a simple greeting, Zabuza also wrote out a message for Mei before showing it to Jiraiya, who also thought the message looked good.

"I have a message for Mei." Zabuza replied. He stopped when he noticed that the Newt and the Toad were both glaring at each other with absolute spite.

"Toad."

"Newt."

The simple words were spoken with venom, and fortunately the two Summons didn't get into anything beyond simply calling each other by what they were, and messages to their respective Kage were sent.

Kimimaro prodded Zoro awake, and Zoro yawned and stretched before taking them back. Once they were out of the mist, Zoro stopped, and stared at the floor of their boat. He was tense; almost resigned to being dragged back to Konoha, but not without a fight. Having to fight against someone who wasn't a Swordsman would be doable, but annoying.

Zabuza and Haku were making their way back to shore by crossing the water, but they looked ready to fight.

"What are you going to do?" Zoro finally asked.

Jiraiya looked over at Kimimaro. "Would you be able to go to shore with the others? I need to have a private chat with Zoro, here."

Kimimaro looked worried, so Jiraiya added, "I just want to talk with him, that's all. We'll be coming back to shore in a few minutes. If you

would tell the others that, it'd be appreciated."

The Kiri-Nin walked to shore, leaving Zoro and the boys with Jiraiya.

Silence reigned for what felt like hours to Zoro, when Jiraiya crossed his arms, finally saying, "Honestly kid, I'm a tad annoyed that you took Naruto like you did, along with making me travel all this way. And you got mixed up with this guy." Jiraiya nodded in Zabuza's direction. "And in all honesty, I have every right to drag your ass back to Konoha for trial. But I'm not going to."

Zoro, Naruto, and Gaara all looked at the man in disbelief.

"Truth is, there's not really a way I can accuse you of lying about either Fugaku or Danzo. Fugaku is a bitter man and Danzo's a manipulative bastard. They both would have their reasons for getting their hands on the Kyuubi, and it wouldn't matter what happened to Naruto.

"Plus... there's no way I could willfully take Naruto back when it's pretty clear how he feels towards you and Gaara, while keeping my conscience clean.

"So. I'm going to let you take him wherever it is you intend to go out there." Jiraiya fixed Zoro with a glare. "And you had *better* take care of him. You understand?"

"Yeah." Zoro said seriously, still somewhat processing what Jiraiya was saying.

"I'll come up with a believable explanation as to why Naruto's no longer in Konoha." Jiraiya continued talking, as he pulled the large scroll on his back around. "Naruto, come here."

Naruto glanced at Zoro before making his way over to Jiraiya, who now unfurled the scroll.

"This is the Toad's Contract. With this, you'll be able to Summon a Toad just like the ones you saw me with earlier. You can write letters back and forth using them."

"Eh, really?" Naruto asked with wide eyes. "How do I do that, 'ttebayou?"

"Well, learning to channel chakra is part of it..." Jiraiya paused as he thought about trying to explain the process to an eight-year-old. He

looked to Zoro. "You know anything about Summoning Contracts?"

"Do I look like I know about that sort of thing? Tch."

Maybe Koshiro had mentioned it once or twice...but since it didn't involve keywords like 'swords', 'training', and 'naps' among others, it had probably been lost on him.

Oo00oo

Back at shore, Naruto was sitting across from Jiraiya as he was going through sensei-lecture mode.

"So you can either bite or cut your thumb to Summon a Toad." Jiraiya wrote down the instructions.

"So does that mean Naruto has a limit of ten times to Summon one of those Toads?" Gaara asked.

Jiraiya paused. "What? Limit? What do you mean?"

"He only has ten fingers, so he can only cut off so many." Gaara said very seriously.

"*WHAT?!*" Naruto shouted, and he started freaking out. "You mean I have to cut off my fingers to Summon the Toads?! I don' wanna do that, 'ttebayo!" Naruto was near tears as he continued, "I *need* my fingers! Zoro-nii wanted to cut them off before to see if I grew them back! I don't *wanna* cut off my fingers, 'ttebayo!"

Jiraiya was looking at Zoro with an expression as if he were almost considering changing his mind. Zoro was looking irritated at Naruto's wails. The Kiri-Nin were having varying thoughts concerning Gaara; because they each were certain the boy would have quickly and easily understood how Summoning worked. Gaara meanwhile, had a subtly pleased smirk on his face that he sort of hid with his head bowed as he poked Naruto to gain his attention.

"I was joking."

"..."

Naruto stared at Gaara in disbelief before pointing an accusing finger and yelled, "You bastard!"

Zoro burst out laughing, Jiraiya gave up with his verbal explanation and simply wrote down how Naruto needed to train in the simplest

terms possible for the sake of a small child, and likely for the sake of Zoro too.

Zabuza sighed as Gaara put up a sandy sphere around himself as Naruto ran around it throwing useless insults, kicks, and punches. The blond kid was far too loud and gullible for his own good; and the redhead was turning into some macabre comedian.

Haku just smiled, commenting, "They're a lively bunch, aren't they?"

"That's a nice way of putting it, Haku." Zabuza muttered.

"I'm glad to have met them." Kimimaro said.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Zoro and the two boys were ready to go.

"Take care of yourselves." Haku said seriously.

"You too!" Naruto said with a grin. "Next time you see me, I'm gonna be an awesome Ninja, just you wait!"

"...I don't want you to die, so be alive next time we see you." Gaara muttered, not really looking at the Kiri-Nin.

"We'll try not to, kid." Zabuza replied, actually finding himself amused at the redhead. He now turned to Zoro, looking very serious.

"Roronoa. Thank you for what you did back there. We wouldn't be standing here..."

Forgoing his pride and any irritation he might have held towards Zoro, he gave the teen a slight bow in thanks. "You've really helped us out, Roronoa. Thank you." Zabuza stood straight and looked at Zoro who stood somewhat awkwardly as he scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah, whatever Tape-Face. Just don't go dying any stupid deaths or anything, got it?"

Haku knelt down in front of Naruto and Gaara, and smiled. "You take care of your precious person, alright?" Haku sent a purposeful look to Zoro before winking at the boys. "He definitely needs it."

"Oi!" Zoro objected. His irritation was interrupted by Kimimaro, who walked up to him and gave a bow.

"Thank you for giving me my freedom, Zoro-san." Kimimaro stood straight once again, and smiled. "I look forward to seeing you all again

when the time comes."

"Yeah...sure." Zoro replied.

Once again, Jiraiya found himself in an awkward position; he felt as if he was intruding on something between the Kiri-Nin, Zoro, Naruto and Gaara.

Jiraiya motioned Naruto over to him.

Naruto hesitantly approached him, and stood just out of arm's length. Jiraiya looked down at Naruto sadly. But this was no longer a time to focus on regrets. He got down on one knee so that he could be at Naruto's level.

"Here, kid." Jiraiya handed Naruto a book.

Naruto took it with a curious expression, and gave the cover a scrutinizing look. With some uncertainty, Naruto read the cover slowly, "*The Tale... of the Gutsy... Shinobi!*"

"Yeah, that's it. Good job." Jiraiya said with a smile.

"Thanks...Zoro-nii's been teaching me how to read. Haku and Kimimaro helped too, 'ttebayou."

There were a few more painful jabs to his chest at that statement. While he certainly wouldn't have been an expert, Naruto should have been able to read with more skill than he showed. How had he failed so badly? "Well...ask Zoro to read it to you. I wrote it, I'll have you know. First book I ever wrote. In fact, your old man read that book all the time."

Naruto paused, and slowly looked up at Jiraiya. There was no longer an uneasiness in his expression. In fact, it was now hopeful curiosity. "You...you knew my dad?"

"I used to be his sensei. Taught him everything I know."

"Did you know my mom, too?"

Jiraiya smiled sadly. "...I did."

Naruto hugged the book to his chest before hesitantly asking, "When I come back after I'm an awesome Ninja and all...will...will you tell me about them?"

"It's a promise."

Naruto smiled at Jiraiya. At that moment, Jiraiya felt as if he were looking at both Kushina and Minato once again.

The spell was broken when a voice called out, "Oi, brat! Let's get going!"

Naruto grinned and turned around excitedly. He looked over his shoulder at Jiraiya. "Bye, old man!"

"I'm not *that* old..." Jiraiya muttered.

He watched as Naruto ran to Zoro, and happily held up the book. He was too far away to hear what was being said, and the wind carried away anything they were saying. Zoro took the book and stuffed into a pocket of the bag that Naruto wore, and the teen was making sure that it was secure. They all climbed into the boat, and Naruto waved enthusiastically with both hands while Gaara just gave a simple wave. Zoro nodded to each of them, and started to row away from shore.

Briefly, Jiraiya wondered what Minato and Kushina would have thought of Zoro. Both of them probably would have teased the teen; but would have truly appreciated how he acted with Naruto.

As the boat disappeared into the mist on the horizon, Jiraiya knew that there could no longer be any regrets. He had made this decision, and there was no going back on it. The members of the Council would be pissed. Although there were a few who probably wouldn't mind that Naruto was gone – but would care about the Kyuubi that he contained. Others, would be just be happy that Naruto was safe.

"Do you regret letting them go?"

Jiraiya turned to look at the deceptively feminine young man at his side.

"Among other things." Jiraiya admitted. Sparing the horizon one last glance, he turned his attention to the Kiri-Nin. They would have to wait for a response from their respective Kage anyway, so they might as all relax.

"So, how exactly did you three get mixed up with Zoro?" Jiraiya questioned, as he sat down on a large rock.

Zabuza, Haku, and Kimimaro all sat down as well.

"Wellll..." Haku looked amused as he began, "It started when Zabuza-sama and I were at a restaurant in a small, run-down village in Kiri..."

00oo00

Once Jiraiya had heard back from Hiruzen, and Zabuza had heard back from Mei, he was on his way back to Konoha. It had been a difficult thing to let Naruto go, but after hearing Zoro's explanation and knowing that the teen would be impossible to track, he could only hope that Naruto would be safe (or at least as safe as he could be) in the Outside world.

The guards at the main gate both made faces of concern at him when they saw that he didn't have either Naruto or Zoro in tow. But Jiraiya marched forward with his jaw set. He ignored how various people in the village looked at him, and he silently wondered which shop it was that had thrown Naruto out.

It was a thought that made him feel guilty. If he had been there, then Naruto wouldn't have been tossed out of stores and he wouldn't have had to deal with getting attacked on his birthday. It was in the past, but still... Jiraiya couldn't get the look that Naruto had given him, and he couldn't help but think of Naruto actually fighting to not return to the village. Well, Naruto had said that he wanted to return someday, and Zoro had said that he wouldn't stop him.

When Jiraiya reached Hiruzen's office, his old sensei was smoking a pipe. When he saw Jiraiya, he pursed his lips and narrowed his eyes. He had only received a message about meeting with someone named Mei, that she was vying for the Mizukage's position, and that she wanted to bring peace to Kiri. All details would be sorted out later in the coming days. There was absolutely nothing about Naruto or Zoro.

Plus, Jiraiya was here *alone*.

"What exactly is going on?"

Jiraiya looked stern as he simply replied, "We need to talk."

There was a secret room that the Hokage could use in case of emergencies; or at least when they wanted to make sure that the walls had neither eyes nor ears. The room was layered with Silencing Seals and Trap Seals, and only a fool would try and break in.

Jiraiya sighed as he looked at Hiruzen and said, "I let Zoro take Naruto."

"What?!" Hiruzen replied. "Why? Jiraiya, what's the meaning of this?"

"Zoro told me that an Uchiha asked him to take care of Naruto, because Uchiha Fugaku is planning a coup. If Naruto were to come back, Fugaku would go after him to try and use the Kyuubi. But Zoro wouldn't tell me *which* of the Uchiha asked him to take care of the kid." Jiraiya frowned as he added, "He was ever so helpful in describing the Uchiha in question as having 'black hair and annoying red eyes'."

It appeared that Fugaku was still bitter after all these years...

The majority of the Uchiha police hadn't exactly helped with the Kyuubi attack directly, and people had accused them of being cowards. A few Uchiha had died that night, and it was only the ones who had defied orders and been as involved as they possibly could with defending the village. From what Hiruzen understood, they had been ordered by Danzo to keep their distance and protect the perimeter for one reason or another. As far the civilian villagers were concerned, the Uchiha had been cowards that night. But out of respect and honor, the Uchiha wouldn't reveal that Danzo had ordered them to stay back. Even if they had, it would have made things look even worse for them. It would have been viewed as a pathetic attempt to share the blame.

"This also means we can't investigate the Uchiha; we simply can't risk it." Hiruzen sucked on his pipe. "If we investigate the Uchiha, we'll have the civilians on the Council and within the village claiming that they were right in that the Uchiha weren't to be trusted all along. It would put what diplomatic relations we have with them into upheaval."

Hiruzen couldn't help but sigh, releasing a plume of smoke.

"That's another thing, sensei. If we investigate the Uchiha, Fugaku will know that he has a family member who's against him. Not only did they prevent him from carrying out his coup, but they brought *more* humiliation down upon the Uchiha."

Both men knew that Fugaku could and would find a way to eliminate family members if he thought that they weren't complying with his wishes. All he had to do was pull a few strings to have the 'traitor' sent out to the battlefield or on an S-rank mission with low chances of survival and death would easily find its target. It would look like an accident or simply the perils of the mission. Hiruzen had his

suspicions that Fugaku had pulled such tactics before; but it was difficult to prove he had sent family members to their deaths when others had died alongside them and death was a near-possibility while on those missions.

"But there's something else."

Hiruzen removed his Hokage hat and ran a hand through his hair.
"What else is there?"

"Danzo intends to wipe out the Uchiha Clan; or at least, he'd like to. With Naruto in the village, the Kyuubi alone more than easily makes up for a few hundred Uchiha. That's why the Uchiha, whoever they are, wanted Naruto out."

Hiruzen pursed his lips and narrowed his gaze. "While I knew that Danzo was pulling strings, I never thought that he would go so far...so where are Zoro and Naruto now?"

Jiraiya scratched the back of his head. "That's another thing sensei... Zoro has Naruto, but he also has Gaara, the Kazekage's youngest with him. Just thought you should know, so it wouldn't be a surprise."

"That boy is far too troublesome." Hiruzen said flatly as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Tell me about it. Anyway, Zoro's no longer *in* the Elemental Nations." Hiruzen gave Jiraiya a startled expression. "Look...I know it's difficult to believe, but the Nations are surrounded by this *extremely* complicated Genjutsu. I saw the Seals; it was incredibly advanced work. There's this entire outside world, which explains everything about Zoro. I saw it briefly, although from what I could see, it wasn't much to look at. Just miles of ocean, but there're numerous islands, according to the map Zoro showed me. I'll even stop by T&I so that Inoichi can scan my mind for the info.

"Zabuza said that once you and the future Mizukage agreed on a truce, he would have more information for us involving that barrier."

Hiruzen looked incredulous at the information.

"I doubted it myself too, sensei... and..." Jiraiya sighed. "Naruto's happy with Zoro. That kid just about worships the ground Zoro walks on. But there was something else. Naruto used the Kyuubi's chakra." Upon seeing Hiruzen's expression, Jiraiya quickly added, "It wasn't intentional, at least, not really...but Naruto attacked me, trying to

protect Zoro. I was about to knock Naruto out, but that was when Zoro grabbed the kid and held onto him and got him to calm down. I still don't know how he did it, but Naruto went back to normal in under a minute."

Jiraiya looked regretful as he continued, "Naruto was scared of *me*, sensei, and he hid behind Zoro." The man scoffed. "Naruto looked more comfortable around me near the end, but still. Zoro has something special with those two boys. He truly cares for them. Naruto told me that he wants to be an amazing Shinobi someday. He didn't say when, but Naruto wants to return to Konoha, once he's strong enough."

Hiruzen nodded in understanding. Naruto's letter had said as much. In his worry, he had gone off on hare-brained theories and trying to see if there was more to Naruto's letter than meets the eye. Again, he thought back to that night a few months ago, remembering how the two had interacted. "I see... I understand why you didn't write any of this down."

"I had Naruto sign the Toads' Contract so that we'll be able to send letters back and forth, although it'll probably be a few years before Naruto can actually Summon anything."

"That's good." Hiruzen nodded again, looking thoughtful. He fixed Jiraiya with his stern gaze. "Jiraiya, this situation involving Naruto and Gaara is to be an S-ranked secret. If Danzo is up to any tricks, then he'll very likely have Shinobi of his own seek out Naruto. So we'll claim that Naruto was in fact rescued; but he's traveling with you, because it'll be safer for him as you can personally train him."

A perfect lie always contained elements of the truth.

"We'll prepare to meet Mei-san as well in a few days' time." Hiruzen looked tired. "I'm getting far too old for this."

If they were going to war, they would need to prepare while they had time. Thinking of all the things one needed during war, one of the most vital of them being Healers. Jiraiya had no idea how the thought crossed his mind, but the idea wiggled its way into his brain and wouldn't leave.

Jiraiya smirked. "You know...one of those Kiri-Nin needs a Healer."

Hiruzen glanced up at Jiraiya, wondering what he was thinking.

"And I already know another boy I can take with me to meet her, and maybe help me convince Tsunade to return."

It would take some thinking and careful planning with Zabuza and Haku to do what he hoped would work. Haku was a damn skilled Shinobi, and he was fairly certain that if Tsunade saw this kid in action, she'd want to take him on as an apprentice. During their conversation, Jiraiya had learned that Haku was an Ice user – not only that, but he had passable medical knowledge. It could certainly use some honing.

Plus, all Kimimaro had to do was stay in Konoha – poor health and the warmer weather was better for him. But it would force Tsunade to return. Would she pass up the chance to treat a rare Kekkei Genkai sickness or just let the boy die? The Healer in her hopefully would step up.

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Iruka wasn't sure why he was being called to the Hokage's office, but he was listing what parents could have potentially complained about in his head. As a result, Iruka was stressing himself out. But he put on his best serious face upon reaching the Hokage's office and he knocked.

The man stopped short when he saw Jiraiya there, standing next to the Hokage. Iruka quickly bowed, and said, "You asked for me?"

"Close the door please."

Iruka obeyed, and the two older men led Iruka into the secret room he knew was there only because he had heard about it in innumerable rumors. Once the door was closed, he wanted to ask what was going on, but he remained silent, letting his elders speak first.

Seeing Iruka's obvious nervousness, Hiruzen smiled in an odd way, looking wistful. "There are some things we can't share with you due to your rank, Iruka-san, but I thought you'd want to know that Naruto is safe. We decided to let Zoro take him—"

"What?!" Iruka realized that he had interrupted the Hokage, and his face flushed. He bowed, "Forgive me Hokage-sama, I-I was... surprised? Why...?"

"It's no problem. Zoro has promised to take care of Naruto, until he decides to return to Konoha, whenever that may be."

"Ah...oh... I see." Iruka's shoulders sagged with both relief and worry.

"This is an S-ranked secret, kid," Jiraiya said seriously. "So don't go telling people this. This isn't gonna be the official announcement that everyone else is going to hear. If anyone asks, Naruto is traveling around the Elemental Nations with one of my contacts for his own safety, before I take him under my wing."

"I understand." Iruka bowed again. "Thank you for telling me."

"Iruka." Hiruzen said with a small smile. "Naruto wants to return to Konoha – but not before becoming an amazing Shinobi."

Jiraiya smirked. "Zoro's taking care of Naruto, and the kid's happy with him. So, you don't need to worry." But there was a brief pause as Jiraiya quietly added, "too much."

Iruka was truly relieved, but he couldn't help but be curious about what Naruto was doing with Zoro. He hoped that the boy would be alright. He was now also curious about Zoro – Naruto was happy with him. Iruka hoped that he would get the chance to actually speak with Zoro someday.

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Fugaku wasn't happy. Things had gradually fallen apart around him, and his Clan members – the ones who had supported the coup – weren't pleased with the news that Naruto wouldn't be returning to Konoha. Not for a few years, at least. Fugaku needed to take his frustration out on something, so he was taking out his anger on a poor training dummy in the Uchiha's personal training grounds.

His eyes flashed red, before slowly becoming black, and blood started running down his face. His eyes burned, and felt as if someone was using a hot poker to rip them out of the back of his skull. Cloudy, black dots started to fill his vision, and Fugaku collapsed to the ground when the pain became too intense.

He sat there, gasping and holding the sides of his head, as he tried to will the pain away. Fugaku fortunately had a towel in his pocket that he used to wipe the blood off, and he laid there and blinked slowly as the world swirled around him.

Fugaku frowned when the world stayed blurry longer than normal. It was almost like looking at a mirror fogged up by steam. His Sharingan currently wasn't active, and Fugaku found himself momentarily

panicking. Fugaku wasn't sure how long he laid there for, watching blurry images swim by as his headache slowly turned into a dull, steady throbbing. But his vision cleared soon enough, and Fugaku pulled himself to his feet.

His disease was obviously taking its toll, and he cursed, because it made Fugaku realize how limited his time truly was.

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Danzo wasn't happy. Something told him that he (and the Village Council) wasn't getting the full story when it came to Naruto's whereabouts. Hiruzen was telling people that Naruto was with one of Jiraiya's contacts, and that the Toad Sage would be raising Naruto outside of the village until a certain point in time – whenever that was.

He had tried talking to Hiruzen, but the man immediately shot down anything revolving around Konoha's Jinchuuriki. The Third clammed up, and stated that for security reasons, only select people would know about Naruto's whereabouts, but no-one knew who those people were. It truly aggravated Danzo that he wasn't one of the people "in the know" and it appeared that he wasn't the only one: Mitokado and Koharu, Hiruzen's own teammates, were kept out of the loop as well.

Sure, they complained to Hiruzen and pointed out flaws in his reasoning, but Hiruzen wouldn't budge. He wouldn't even drop a hint as to where the Jinchuuriki was. There was certainly a sense of betrayal felt by his teammates, and Hiruzen gave both of them and the Council a glare as he put a sense of finality on their argument.

"You have the *village's* interest at heart; not Naruto's. Naruto will be safer and happier where he is right now, and not back in the village." Hiruzen took in a deep breath, and exhaled, smoke surrounding him. "I've made one too many mistakes concerning the boy, and I intend to make up for them."

He tapped his pipe on an ashtray before setting it down. "Don't approach me again concerning Naruto. Consider the conversation over if any of you do."

Danzo said nothing as select members of the Council grumbled, while certain Clan Heads had looks of amusement. They were the ones who had been impartial to the Jinchuuriki and hadn't objected to anything concerning Hiruzen's decision.

In fact, it was Shikaku who simply asked, "So the kid's safe?"

"As safe as he'll ever be," Hiruzen replied, and it was left at that.

Danzo was already planning to have some of his ROOT members look around, and even poke around the various other Hidden Villages, to see if anything came up. He would undoubtedly have to rework years of planning, but Danzo was nothing if not patient.

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The moment Ichibi saw the face of Ryuuma, it felt as if everything around him had gone still. It was him – the man with the black blade who had sat across from him with a smile and told tales of his amazing feats and the Outside world. How could he have forgotten?

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Ichibi quirked an eyebrow at the Human who stood across from him, with a determined glint in his eyes. He gripped his black sheathed sword tightly, and he declared,

"Tanuki-san! I owe you my life! Allow me to repay you my debt!"

Ichibi only sighed, looking at the Human. He honestly didn't look like much; black hair, dark eyes, and worn clothing. In fact, it seemed that the most expensive thing he owned was that black sword. It made Ichibi wonder if he had stolen it – but there was no malice or anything of the sort connected to the sword.

Since when did Humans want to pay back the Bijū for anything? This had been going on for the past week, with this Human repeatedly showing up, insisting that he needed to repay his debt. Sure, he spent time with numerous Humans who had made their way to the Bijū's Sanctuary – the Kūhaku Clan were usually the only ones who came around simply to spend time with the Bijū. The Clan always treated the Bijū with upmost respect and Ichibi had many friends among them that went back a few generations.

Unlike the Elders and various lords who came in the hopes of making deals so that the wars they were waging would be turned in their favor. These foolish Humans often forgot that Bijū were meant to keep balance; not win wars for any particular side. Sometimes even politics were brought up; things that were far too boring to even bother remembering.

Deciding that simply because he was bored, Ichibi would humor this odd Human, and maybe get a little fun out of it as well.

"Why?"

The man continued with his reasoning, "You saved my life, Tanuki-san! I must pay you back in full!"

Ichibi rolled his eyes at the dramatic and impassioned speech the man used.

"...You do know what I am, right? I have no fuckin' need for petty Human affairs such as these debts you're goin' on about."

"Tanuki-san, it would be dishonorable of me to simply walk away without paying you back in kind!"

"What's your name, Human?"

The man smirked confidently. "Ryuuma, the Wandering Samurai."

"Alright, then." Ichibi smirked. "I'm Ichibi, but Tanuki is fine as well."

"It's nice to officially meet you, Tanuki-san." Ryuuma bowed in a way that showed he wasn't exactly used to showcasing manners.

Ichibi frowned somewhat at the continued 'san' honorific. The others before him had always referred to him and his siblings as 'sama'. They just met and yet he's already acting so casual? Interesting Human indeed.

Kyuubi shivered, even though he wasn't cold. The sight of Ryuuma and Ikue brought out something in his long-forgotten memories. It made him feel like a fool, for having forgotten.

Ikue who smiled at him, as she proudly showed off her drawings of him and his siblings; and Ryuuma who often went out of his way to see them whenever he came to the Elemental Nations. He had gone out of his way to bring a bottle of sake from his home island of... Kyuubi couldn't remember the name. It had been considered the Elemental Nations' sister country, because... reasons he couldn't recall; it had been how long since he had even thought of it?

It was at the tip of his tongue, but it simply wouldn't come to him.

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A man carrying a black-sheathed blade stepped out into the clearing of the Biju's Sanctuary looking around unimpressed. He did give slight pauses whenever his dark eyes landed on one of the Biju, but they weren't filled with the usual awe or fear Humans exhibited whenever they came here for the first time.

"Ichibi, who is that Human?" Hachibi asked, since the Human had entered alongside the Tanuki.

Ichibi simply shrugged. **"I unwittingly saved his fucking life, and now he wishes to repay his debts."**

Nanabi laughed. **"A Human wishes to repay the Bijū?"** she fluttered her wings briefly before taking flight and landing in front of the Human who didn't even stumble when the earth shook from Nanabi's impact. In fact, the Human didn't even blink an eye at Nanabi who stuck her face as close as she could into the man's own, coming within centimeters of him. **"And who might this lowly Human be, that thinks he can pay back the great Bijū?"**

"Ryuuma, the Wandering Samurai."

"A wanderer?" Nanabi did not look impressed. She scoffed. **"A lowly, Human wanderer with a cheap blade like that?"** Nanabi was well aware that the blade was nowhere near cheap, but she was looking to get a rise out of the man. Humans often placed far too much value on fleeting possessions. Humans often focused on the most foolish of offences. Chakra hung in the air around her, as she lashed out. **"What exactly can you do?"**

Still, Ryuuma did not even react. In fact, he looked altogether bored. He scratched his ear. **"I killed a Dragon, once."**

It was not said as bragging; but rather casually stated as a fact.

"Did you now?" Kyuubi asked, waving his tails. He gave a mocking smirk. **"And how big was this Dragon? The size of a small horse?"**

"Naw, it was actually bigger than you, Fox-san."

Kyuubi laughed. **"Such confidence! How could a Human like as yourself do such a thing?"**

Ryuuma looked around for a moment before asking, **"How connected are you with that huge rock?"**

The rock in question was only a few miles away, and neared twelve meters in height.

"It is a mere rock, so do what you will, Wanderer." Kyuubi said, with a careless wave of his claw. **What was this Human going to do?**

Ryuuma drew his blade, and it reflected the sunlight. He got into position to execute an attack, and an odd, black sheen slowly covered his blade. He swung his sword, and at first, it seemed as if nothing happened. But then, the top half of the rock began to slide, and it hit the ground with a crash.

The Biju all stared.

"He cut the rock?!" Sanbi exclaimed.

Their shock was due to the fact that there didn't seem to be any chakra or Jutsu involved in that move.

They all looked at Ryuuma, who silently sheathed his sword. Within seconds, he collapsed to the ground, and a loud, growling noise escaped him.

"Eh..." he scratched his head, giving an embarrassed chuckle. "Would you mind if I got something to eat? It's been a few days since I've eaten..."

Kyuubi burst out laughing, at the sheer audacity of this Human. It would certainly be most entertaining to keep him around.

Chapter End Notes

Memories ~ Foreshadowing ~

12 meters = 39 feet

An Interlude of Sorts Pt. 1. – Goodbye, my Friends –Kakashi

Chapter Summary

Committing treason isn't something Kakashi ever thought he would resort to. But being unable to fulfill his former sensei's last wishes; failing to keep his promise to Obito and failing Rin; driving away Koshiro - Kakashi has clung to those regrets like a life line. Seeing Zoro stand where he should have been for the past eight years causes Kakashi to make a difficult choice, even if it means potentially following in his father's footsteps.

Chapter Notes

This was something that I was looking forward to writing, and had it finished long before some of the previous chapters. I know it's a little disjointed, but it's written like that for a reason.

Thank you for reading and reviewing *kisses*

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On the Night of October 10

"Don't go killing yourself with a stupid death, Zoro-kun." Kakashi warned in a good-natured tone.

"I'll try not to. Take care of yourself, Flea-bag." Zoro smirked and waved, departing down the street and disappearing into the crowd.

Kakashi held his hand up until he could no longer see the Swordsman. He lowered his hand and stuffed it into his pocket. Kakashi headed the opposite way and made his way towards the inn that "Gin" had checked into. It wouldn't make any sense for someone to check-in, yet never check out. On his way, "Gin" sold a few books to customers. In the morning, "Gin" would leave Konoha, at least for a while. This one persona of many helped Kakashi practice his ability to disguise himself even from those who knew him using practical means.

Kakashi had to chuckle to himself when he was pretty sure he had seen Gai earlier, and his self-proclaimed rival hadn't even known it was him.

With a wig, makeup, a change of inflection in his voice, and a simple

change of outfit with only a subtle application of Genjutsu, it honestly stroked Kakashi's ego when people who knew him so well didn't even recognize him. It showed his practical skills, and if he could get away with hiding in plain sight from those that personally knew him, then his skills outside the village would truly shine.

It was typical of Kakashi to suddenly show up wearing his ANBU gear, ready for work even if he technically had the day off, so no-one would be too surprised to see him. After leaving a clone of "Gin" at the inn, Kakashi donned his ANBU gear and decided to hang close to Naruto; because it was always on this particular day that people chose to give the boy an especially difficult time. Kakashi wished he could do more for the boy, but he could never get directly involved, lest someone in the higher-ups accuse him of somehow trying to influence Naruto.

But it was on this night as Kakashi was making his way through the village that he heard a ruckus going on. Sighing, because he'd much rather be watching after Naruto, he decided to deal with the problem since he was here. That was when he saw it:

The issue was Naruto. A man was holding Naruto up and was choking him, angrily shouting that it was the boy's fault that someone was dead. Anger boiled within Kakashi, because that man wasn't the only one to lose someone, and how *dare* he accuse his sensei's son of something he had absolutely *nothing* to do with, when it happened before he could move.

Zoro showed up, yelling, "*Oi, bastard!*" as he threw an empty sake bottle at the man's head, and ducked low as he rammed the butt of his sword into the man so hard that he actually flew back and landed in an ungraceful heap a few feet away. He had released his hold on Naruto, and Zoro nimbly caught Naruto mid-air and held him close. Zoro held Naruto in such a way that if the man retaliated, Zoro would be the first to get hit. He wielded his most precious sword in his other hand and pointed it at the drunk with a dangerous glare that would have sent any sensible person running.

Zoro stood and demanded of the man:

"What the fucking hell you bastard, he's a fucking kid!"

"You have no idea what that brat is!"

Kakashi saw how Naruto leaned into Zoro with comfort and relief. When other villagers tried to get the drunk to stop, Kakashi saw how Zoro's glare intensified. He wasn't exactly sure why Zoro was angry at

the people trying to stop the man, but it definitely didn't involve any sort of disappointment on the teen's part.

Zoro looked down at Naruto in a way, and curiosity showed itself on Zoro's features. Kakashi supposed it was because Zoro was trying to figure out why Naruto was subject to people's ire. But then, the drunk who was apparently named "Mori" or something like that, cursed at Zoro and charged. Zoro simply flipped his blade around and brought it down against Mori's leg with enough force that Kakashi heard the bone snapping even from where he was.

It was time to step in.

Kakashi appeared just ahead of fellow ANBU and Uchiha Police, and he saw Zoro's gaze pass over him only briefly. Mori was taken away by Hawk, and Kakashi felt little to no pity for the man. He wasn't sure what sort of punishment Mori would be subject to, but a simple fine wouldn't cover hinting at the Kyuubi, or assaulting a fellow villager; a child, no less.

"Drop your weapon!" a man ordered, but Zoro glared at them.

It was the type of glare that belonged on a cornered animal. It was *dangerous*. Kakashi wouldn't deny a shiver going up his spine, even though that glare wasn't directed at him.

"No way am I giving up my sword." He slightly adjusted so that the boy was facing away from the newcomers. "So you intervene when some fat ass like that gets injured, but not when he's attacking a kid? No way am I gonna surrender to low-life dipshits like that."

"Listen, kid," Fugaku spoke calmly, his Sharingan activated. Kakashi could hear the man's bristling anger. "It's best to come down to the station quietly, so put the boy down-"

"Like hell." Zoro spat. His glare made the others hesitate to approach him. There it was: the cornered animal baring its fangs, and Kakashi noticed how the others stiffened in immediate response, because there was a monster in their midst; and it most certainly wasn't Naruto or the Kyuubi. "Do any of you even realize or even fucking care that that drunk bastard was choking this kid? And no-one," Zoro's furious and accusing glare was directed at the other villagers as he spoke, many of them flinching back in response. "No-one cared! No-one did a thing to stop it!" Zoro's tone leaked poisonous sarcasm. "So forgive me if I'm not willing to part with my sword or leave this kid with these low-life, shitty excuses for human beings!"

Something resonated within Kakashi upon seeing how Zoro reacted to this entire situation. Guilt and anger surfaced, because at that moment, Kakashi wished *he* had been the one standing where Zoro was, angrily demanding an explanation for *why*.

It was then Monkey showed up, saying that the Third wanted to see Zoro, and to bring Naruto. Monkey stood by Zoro as he easily sheathed his sword, and then adjusted Naruto so that he could carry him more comfortably. But Zoro made sure that he could still draw his sword if need be. They started moving, and knowing Zoro's tendency to wander, Kakashi moved to grab his arm.

...his tendency to wander.

It was at that moment, as Kakashi gripped Zoro's arm that an idea began to form in his mind. A crazy, outlandish, and very *traitorous* idea. What if...what if he could somehow sneak Zoro and Naruto out, because hell, Zoro appeared in random places when he didn't have a guide present or something to focus on... well, Zoro's focus tended to wander just as much as he did, but... *would* it even work? How could he make it work? He had no guarantee of it working. It was all up to chance, yet...Zoro had some crazy luck on his side. How would he even get Zoro and Naruto alone together to explain things without getting caught?

Kakashi's mind went into overdrive as he tried to think, wondering what he should do. It was his chance to do right by Minato and Kushina, and let Naruto have a chance for a life that didn't involve having to look over his shoulder in his own village. He had seen how Naruto was left out; how he was left alone; how people treated him when they thought no-one was looking. There were villagers who got away with what they did because they found loopholes within the rules, following them at the barest minimum, and the Third could only do so much without being a sort of dictator or showing the favoritism that he had wanted to avoid.

But would Zoro be willing to take Naruto, even if it was as a favor to him? Zoro didn't like kids, or at least he acted like he didn't. Zoro had made a few kids cry (Hyuuga Hinata had been one of them).

The conversation in the Third's office was tense, to say the least.

Kakashi sorely wished that Zoro had a filter of some kind, because when he said,

"What is inside him? There's no way Naruto is some normal kid."

It showed that Zoro was far more perceptive (about some things) than he let on, but he had said it in front of the worst people. But Zoro's nonchalant attitude noticeably threw off the older folks, showing they didn't receive the response they had undoubtedly been expecting. Zoro showed that he was worried for Naruto's wellbeing in his own brusque, roundabout way. He showed his anger when it was clear that Naruto wasn't getting the care that he deserved.

Zoro visibly seethed for a few minutes before quietly saying, *"If I were to offer to take him, what would you say?"*

Kakashi looked at Zoro, and saw that he *meant* it. Perhaps Zoro somehow identified with Naruto, considering Zoro hadn't had any parents either growing up.

"That's impossible." Koharu spoke before her companions could say anything. *"Although you have assisted us in the past, you affiliate with other villages even though you haven't allied with them. There's no way we would let Naruto be taken by an outsider such as yourself, Roronoa-san."*

"Okay...well, I was just curious." Kakashi knew that Fugaku was watching Zoro; looking for something, *anything* to be amiss. *"There's no way I could take some loudmouth brat with me anyway...You know, to be honest...if I didn't have that man to find, I'd probably stick around."*

Fugaku didn't see anything, but the Uchiha didn't know Zoro like Kakashi did. He could see how Zoro had stiffened; how his usual resting frown was in an unsettled scowl; how his eyebrows furrowed; how *angry* he *really* was about this. Kakashi was even surer about his decision then. It *would* be the right choice.

Zoro's anger showed itself again when Fugaku wouldn't let him leave. It was obvious to Kakashi that Zoro was holding back.

"Fine, you want a statement? I'll give you one. I, Roronoa Zoro defended a fucking kid from a drunk moron while everyone else stood around gawking. I'm surprised that they didn't start throwing money, they certainly thought it was entertaining enough. I broke that bastard's leg with my sword, when in reality I wanted to relieve him of his limbs." Zoro glared at the old people while Kakashi resisted face-palming *again*. Why must Zoro say such things? That certainly wasn't doing the teen any favors! *"And here, the concern is whether or not I'm a threat and nobody seems to give a single flying fuck that Naruto was getting strangled. When were you and those masked people planning to show up? When it was most convenient? You all have such great timing."*

When all things were said and done, Zoro left, slamming the door and breaking it. Kakashi eyed the door, and slowly proceeded to open it, and it came off the hinges in his hand. Turning to the others with an amused smile hidden under his mask, he said, "*Mah, Roronoa-san certainly doesn't seem to know his own strength.*"

Kakashi exited the office and carefully placed the now useless door back into place.

He watched the interaction unfold between Naruto and Zoro, and he felt pity. Naruto *so badly* wanted someone's attention, and the fact that Zoro; a complete stranger, had taken the time to not only notice Naruto outside of a prank, but had also protected him, showed just how badly Naruto *needed* someone.

It wasn't fair to Naruto. It made Kakashi's difficult choice that much easier.

As if by chance, Zoro ended up lifting Naruto onto his shoulders, and that left Kakashi looking for a way to somehow separate themselves from Monkey, with the man being none-the-wiser. But then, there was the sound of firecrackers, and people were running back and forth.

"I'll go high, you go low!"

If Kakashi hadn't been aware of Zoro's wandering tendencies, he would have left a clone behind with Zoro. Of course, he knew just how much that wouldn't work. A clone did a very poor job as babysitter for a guy who simply wandered off at the drop of a hat. So he just let go, and hoped that Zoro's crazy-dumb luck came into play.

Once the crowd was under control, and they realized that there wasn't an attack, and fortunately no-one was hurt, Kakashi and Monkey regrouped.

"Where's Roronoa?" Monkey asked, trying to mask the nervousness in his voice.

Kakashi sounded as serious as he could muster, and any nervousness in his voice could easily be taken for anything else than what it truly was. "This isn't good... my clone is gone, too."

Monkey visibly stiffened, and he was on the radio immediately, alerting the other ANBU. "Roronoa Zoro and Uzumaki Naruto have gone missing! Search the area!"

"I'll search the village's borders," Kakashi said quickly, and only caught the last bit of Monkey saying something about informing the Hokage.

And then chaos descended onto Konoha as people realized that Naruto was gone.

It was difficult and nerve racking as Kakashi kept a sharp eye and nose out for Zoro, and finally, with great relief he spotted the teen walking somewhere outside of the village. His Ninken disappeared in a cloud of smoke once their Summoner found their target. After commenting about something to do with the night; that was when he told Zoro about Naruto and made his selfish request.

Kakashi hadn't told Zoro everything about why he couldn't take in Naruto, but he had implied it. It pained Kakashi to be kept so distant from Naruto, yet at the same time it was a relief that he didn't have the responsibility to care for a child when Kakashi could barely drag himself out of bed some (most) mornings. When he simply let his things pile up around him, leaving his room in disarray, and look in the mirror and tell (lie to) himself that everything was okay, looking into his and Obito's mismatched eyes, and coming up with absurd and wild tales about why he was late to something. When he drowned his troubles and memories with alcohol because he was well-aware that some drugs could impact the chakra system so badly and even irreversibly; and life as a Shinobi was all he had and if he did something to irreversibly damage that... *what else did he have?*

Guilt, anger, sadness, and remorse had piled up and he had always refused to face it, because he was *fine*. That was what he told himself, anyway. But he couldn't take in Naruto, and always watched from a distance, doing whatever he could whenever he had the chance. Maybe if he had fought for Naruto, had the same courage that Zoro did in that moment... maybe things would have been different.

If only... if only he had stepped up when his (late) sensei needed him most, when his son (honorary little brother) needed him, Kakashi could hardly even look at him, because it was his precious sensei's face and Kushina looking up at him at the exact same time, and he couldn't even face the kid in his own shame. Naruto would probably hate him if he knew that Kakashi could have taken him in and he didn't because he was a coward. He was always running. Running from the past and trying his best to avoid it.

If only he hadn't messed up so badly that both of his teammates had suffered the consequences.

If only he had told his dad that he hadn't been ashamed of him at the time, and had listened to Koshiro, and just *talked* to him...

If only...

Kakashi had so many 'if only' and 'what ifs', that it felt like he was drowning.

So here he stood, across from Zoro, asking him to take on the responsibility he should have taken on eight years ago.

"*You sure about this, Kakashi?*" Zoro was looking at him with an odd expression on his face, searching for something, probably.

"...Yes."

"*You don't sound convinced. Should I worry?*" Zoro frowned. It was a look that plainly said that Zoro didn't believe him.

"*Not about me, no.*" Kakashi was insistent, as he smiled at the teen from under his cloth mask. He wouldn't tell Zoro that if he were caught, he would be executed. Maybe if they found out, Kakashi could make a life for himself as a rogue-Nin. Or maybe, he could finally join his father. That'd make things easier. Probably. He'd play it by ear.

He told Zoro about Minato and Kushina, because Naruto deserved to know about his parents. Even if it had been for his protection, he should have known who they were from the start. Kakashi knew that there were those who told him that his parents hadn't wanted him. How untrue and cruel that statement was. Did those people know who Naruto's parents were? If they did, where did they get off saying such things?

Zoro sighed heavily. He was still unconvinced. "*Got it. I'll take care of the kid.*"

It was in how Zoro said it that Kakashi *knew* he *would*. The way Zoro gripped Wado Ichimonji, the way his silver eyes glinted. If he had the time, Zoro would have made a Swordsman's Promise right then and there. That was the type of person Zoro was. There was a tightness in Kakashi's chest, knowing he would probably never see Naruto again. He eyed the sleeping boy, mentally telling him goodbye.

There was barking and howling in the distance, and Kakashi recognized the sounds of the Inuzuka Clan tracking down their prey.

"Take care of yourself, Flea-Bag."

"You too, Marimo-san. Good luck."

When Zoro turned to leave – well, more like he started heading for the village again, and Kakashi was about to stop him, but then he suddenly turned left into the trees and came out on the *right* side of the path farther ahead. Kakashi wondered if Zoro had some sort of Kekkei Genkai that he wasn't even aware of, because Zoro constantly insisted that the people around him were the ones getting lost; that the paths and buildings were moving. That certainly explained so many things...

OoOoO

Kakashi stood before the Third Hokage and told a half-truth. "When those firecrackers went off, Monkey split off from me, and went ahead. I created a clone to watch Zoro, but since it was gone, I suspect that he dispelled it."

Because he and Monkey had been witnesses to this entire shit storm, both of them had to be subject to Yamanaka Inoichi's special mind-reading Jutsu to ensure that they were telling the truth; that things matched up to their version of events, right down to the smallest detail.

Kakashi was well-aware that one of the things the Yamanaka Clan could do when they were looking into people's memories was that they could insert themselves into the scene, and look at everything and everyone around them in clear detail. They could rewind events and replay them in slow-motion. If memories were fuzzy, they could simply talk in gentle tones and help coax those memories to the surface.

So as Kakashi sat in the chair across from Inoichi, he prepared himself to be subject to one of the best literal mind readers the Shinobi Nations had ever produced.

Kakashi had a plan that even *he* was calling crazy, but if he wanted to get out of this alive and not as a traitor to Konoha, he would have to do this right. He was aware that memories were fickle things, and unless a person was a trained Shinobi, a person could potentially misremember something. Shinobi trained hard to ensure that they could have perfect recall; but it wasn't always *that* perfect. That was why when having an eyewitness, a Yamanaka was on hand to help clarify someone's memory.

In the case of some sort of perilous incident, a person could remember seeing a man with a mole on his face, but then after being subject to a Yamanaka, it would turn out that the man they had seen didn't have a mole at all – he wouldn't even have a scar. Another thing about the memories was the fact that if the Shinobi hadn't noticed it or was not aware of certain details, then those things wouldn't show up in the memory. While the technique was only slightly flawed, it was powerful and damn useful.

So Kakashi thought about the time a little over a year ago, when he had first met Zoro, and that night, doing his best to meld the memories together.

When Inoichi entered Kakashi's mind, he watched and listened as Zoro lifted Naruto to his shoulders, and then from somewhere, there was the sound of firecrackers going off. As the crowd panicked, there was an odd shift in the memories, like shadows or something rippling across the scene (he made a note of that, just in case. He would have to make sure that that portion of the memory happened the same way twice, backwards and forwards) as Kakashi made a clone and went to help with crowd control.

And then they realized Naruto was gone. It was here that Inoichi was suddenly hit with a wave of sadness and guilt, and he heard pained screaming in his mind,

'My fault! It's all my fault! It's my fault that he's gone!' repeated over and over again in even more intense frequencies. *'I failed...I'm so sorry...'* It was so painful, that it actually forced Inoichi out of Kakashi's mind, and the man actually felt physically ill being subject to that level of emotion.

Inoichi took in deep, gasping breaths to calm himself, and looked up at Kakashi, who was simply staring at his lap with tears running down his face. Inoichi balked. He *never* thought that he would ever see the day where *Hatake Kakashi* cried.

"...Kakashi?" Inoichi quietly asked.

"It's all my fault..." Kakashi whispered. "I failed sensei... I couldn't protect his son...I can't protect anyone..."

It was then Inoichi realized that Kakashi had been bottling everything up, and pretending that everything was fine, when it absolutely wasn't. Going to a therapist was optional, and because Kakashi was just *so good* at masking his emotions, no-one had been the wiser.

Inoichi could only watch as Kakashi broke down in front of him, and he was glad that the room was soundproof, because no-one should ever have to see or hear a man everyone thought was so strong completely crumble. So he simply put his hand on Kakashi's shoulder, and said nothing.

Inoichi wondered why Kakashi had been bottling up all of this and for how long. He blamed himself for Naruto getting taken; he blamed himself for Rin and Obito's deaths; he blamed himself for his father's death as well, and even mentioned Koshiro, and how he believed that he had driven the man off, even though he had been a child at the time.

There was no way he could subject Kakashi to any sort of interrogation while he was like this. So after Kakashi was calm enough to stop crying, and apologized (*apologized* as if it were his fault) Inoichi could only sigh.

"We're going to deal with this now, Kakashi." Inoichi said seriously, watching how the younger man mutely nodded. It was only through the simple motion that showed Inoichi that his words had been registered. "There's a room down the hall that you can use..." looking at Kakashi for another moment he added, "And leave all your gear here."

He wasn't going to say *'because from here on out, you're on suicide watch'* because that wasn't exactly something he wanted to subject Kakashi to. It wasn't healthy to call someone out on something like that, not in the state Kakashi was in, anyway.

So Kakashi removed his flak jacket, his hitai-ate, and his gloves, leaving only his basic shirt, pants, and sandals. He slowly went to the room where Inoichi had directed him, and laid down on the bed. He wondered how long he would be here. Kakashi knew that he would eventually have to face the ghosts of his past, and for once, he couldn't run.

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Kakashi didn't really remember much of Koshiro, but from what he did remember, the man was often silent and always had a small, gentle smile on his face. He had been friends with Sakumo, and the two had bonded, somehow... Kakashi wasn't really sure how their friendship had come about. They had been friends long before he was born. They had been close enough friends that Koshiro had been

something like an uncle to him. He remembered that Koshiro had been a genius with swords.

He often said something that was very contradictory, *"A sword that cuts nothing can cut anything; even steel."*

Kakashi never knew what he had meant by that. How could a sword cut nothing? But he vaguely remembered watching Koshiro hitting sheets of paper with the obviously very sharp blade of his sword, and the paper fell to the ground, completely unscathed.

"...Did you use chakra to cover your blade?" A young Kakashi asked.

Koshiro simply smiled. *"If you need to cover your blade in chakra to cut nothing, then you do not have a sword."*

It was so frustrating to hear that. The circular answer answered nothing.

But then, there was a day that Koshiro put away his swords and refused to pick them up. People called him foolish and weak for doing so. Kakashi noticed Koshiro looking at him at times, with an odd emotion on his face. It was a smile, but it was off. It wasn't until as an adult, Kakashi could identify that expression as a mix of regret and sadness.

"You're wrong about Koshiro-san." Sakumo had insisted to the other villagers. *"He's still strong; Koshiro-san is not weak."*

Kakashi looked up at his father. *"Why are they calling Koshiro-san weak?"*

Sakumo looked down at him, with an expression of sadness. *"Because, Kakashi...he killed someone..."*

"But he's killed people before. Why is it different this time?"

Sakumo leaned down so that he was touching foreheads with Kakashi, and he put his hands on Kakashi's shoulders. It felt as if the weight of the world was on the man at the time as he spoke. *"Because the person he killed was a child... the boy was around your age."*

At the time, Kakashi hadn't understood why something like that would impact someone so heavily. Killing people was something that you could become numb to; accepting it as a harsh reality of life. But killing a child who was only around six years of age...

Someone who had lived a long life taking the life of someone who barely even had a chance at life at all; it was truly unfair to all those involved.

Koshiro was looked down upon because he took early retirement purely because he couldn't handle going out in the field anymore. He still worked for the village, but did so in the records building.

Then came the day that changed Kakashi's life forever.

Sakumo had failed the mission. He failed because he had gone back for his teammates. Kakashi wasn't sure how he should feel. Sakumo had done the right thing...hadn't he? But everyone was insisting that he wrong, telling Sakumo and Kakashi how the man had lost all respect; he didn't deserve it. His teammates were angry with him as well.

If Sakumo had just completed the mission, than none of this would be happening. He would still have the village's respect. Not even a week later, Kakashi got home to find his father in a puddle of blood, and he hasn't entered his family home since.

People still talked, but it was in whispers. They talked about Kakashi, even though he was sure that they knew that they could hear him. They talked about his father, as if they had the right.

If only...if only Sakumo had *just* completed the mission, then *none* of this would have happened. If only Sakumo hadn't insisted that friends came first. But look at how those 'friends' treated him. Look at where having *friends* had gotten him. There was no need for friends, because in the end, even if you saved their lives, they would turn on you.

Kakashi simply accepted the missions that came to him, because dealing with the turmoil of emotions he felt in his heart was pointless. It didn't matter. None of it did. Because all that mattered, was the mission.

"Kakashi-kun...I'm so sorry..."

Kakashi turned to look up at the man. He had been avoiding his father's so-called friends, because they had all turned on him.

"What?"

Koshiro looked at Kakashi with that sad expression. "*Sakumo was right.*"

Something panged in Kakashi's heart when Koshiro said that. Anger and betrayal expounded upon the hurt. His father had chosen *wrong*. Sakumo's friends had *betrayed* him. His father had *left him* behind because of *them*.

"My father was a fool."

Koshiro shook his head. *"No, you're wrong, Kakashi-kun. Sakumo was right, in what he did. Those people are still alive, thanks to him—"*

"Well, he's dead now, so what does it matter?"

"Kakashi-kun, your father—"

Kakashi didn't want to hear it. In his hurt and his anger, he lashed out.

"What do you know, Koshiro-san? You don't know anything! My father sacrificed everything for them, and for what?! They all turned on him! They were right about him, and they were right about you, too. You're weak; you can't even handle killing a child. It is the reality of people who choose to become Shinobi. If you couldn't handle a job as simple as that, then you never should have become a Shinobi in the first place!"

The last time Kakashi saw Koshiro, he was looking at him with an expression of hurt, sadness, and even anger. It was just days after that, there was news of Koshiro defecting from Konoha, and he hadn't been seen or heard of since. Kakashi wondered if it had been his fault, but then he had shoved those thoughts aside. Koshiro was probably just like the others; his betrayal had been inevitable.

Looking back now, why had he said those things? Kakashi had blamed himself for driving Koshiro away. If only he had listened to Koshiro.

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Kakashi had met Obito when they were children, becoming part of a Genin team for the first time. Obito was everything that Kakashi wasn't in terms of personality. Obito was loud, and brash, and seemed to be an Uchiha in nothing but name only. That childish part of Kakashi was pleased with annoying Obito so much, making snarky comments at his expense, and causing Obito to pretty much blow a gasket whenever they were within ten feet of each other.

While Kakashi was always on time, Obito always showed up late, and always had an elaborate story to go along with why he was late. Often, it involved helping old women with their groceries, dogs

chasing him, cats stuck up trees... oh, and how the list could go on.

Kakashi always pointed out the flawed logic in Obito's stories, and had some sort of insult prepared.

"You must think we're stupider than you look if you think we'll believe that."

"So...you helped an old woman out of a burning building, gave someone directions, played hopscotch with some children and helped a cat out of a tree? If that were true, where's the evidence of ash on your clothing and the smell of smoke? Wouldn't we have seen the smoke from the fire if it was as bad as you say it was? Well...I actually do believe that you played hopscotch. You're childish enough for that. I can see why dogs don't like you. And every time you come within two feet of a cat, it just about attacks you, and you don't have a scratch. You just overslept."

"GAAHH! Dammit, Bakakashi!" Obito glared at him, and Rin giggled at Obito's expression.

Minato could only sigh as the children argued.

This was their dynamic. Always arguing, while Rin attempted to be the peace keeper between him and Obito, and Minato was simply exasperated with his team. They managed to make it work, somehow.

But Kakashi was ahead of Obito and Rin both by leaps and bounds in many ways, but looking back now, Kakashi figures that he had been emotionally stunted. He had shut himself off from everyone, because that made things easier. (What good were friends when they would only turn on you and leave you?) As long as they could complete the mission, then things would be fine.

That was the drive Kakashi had: complete the mission, and nothing else matters. Your teammates were nothing more than that. They were there to help complete the mission. They were nothing more than tools to ensure that things ran smoothly, and if one or two of them were gone, then there was still one more left in the machine to complete the mission.

They had been a team for a few years now, and they were good at what they did. There had always been danger with various missions; that was to be expected. But they had been extremely lucky in the fact that they had always gotten out with barely a scratch. Anything more serious than that, Rin was always there to patch them up. But they had never been in a situation that forced them to permanently leave

someone behind, because they always had each other's backs in the sense they operated like a well-oiled machine.

Obito still continued to be late to whatever their team was doing, and always had a story to tell, and Kakashi got on his nerves, and Rin played peace keeper while also being their Healer. She was skilled as a Healer, always there to heal their wounds, no matter what. There were remnants of faded scars here and there, but that was it. They had been lucky, and Rin often mentioned that she was so thankful that they hadn't had to deal with something more life-threatening.

Then came the day that changed everything. It was his birthday, and Minato had gotten him some custom-made kunai, Rin had gotten him a med-kit, and Obito showed up empty-handed because he had forgotten what day it was.

"How could you forget Kakashi-kun's birthday, Obito-kun?" Rin admonished.

Obito blushed.

"It's alright, Rin. I wouldn't expect someone like Obito to remember." Kakashi shrugged. *"It's not like there's anything he could get that I don't already have or could use."*

"What?!" Obito shouted in anger.

"Now, Kakashi, that was uncalled for." Minato said with a sigh, as if he felt things could never change.

"Dammit, Bakakashi! I'll get you an awesome birthday present! It'll be so awesome, you'll never want to throw it away and you'll use it for the rest of your stupid life!"

Minato smiled a bit awkwardly while Kakashi just rolled his eyes. There Obito went, making claims he could never hope to back up.

"Well, you can get your present when we get back." Minato said, looking down at them. *"We have a mission to do, so let's go!"*

"Hai!" three voices answered him.

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Then came a time later on in the mission that they had to split off from Minato, and while that wasn't unusual, they had done it before;

and Kakashi was in charge, as usual. When it came to their missions, and Minato wasn't there, the responsibility often fell to him.

Because Obito wasn't responsible enough (in Kakashi's opinion) and Rin, while perfectly responsible, was better suited in a supporting role; that was what being a Healer meant. But looking back, while Obito wasn't the best at planning long-term, he had been excellent at making split second decisions and giving out orders that ensured the team's success.

But that day, something had gone wrong.

Rin had been taken, and Kakashi was perfectly fine with leaving her behind. He was fully aware now of the crush she had held for him that had started around the time they first became a team; and he often wondered what she would have thought of him then. Would she still have loved him as much if she could have read his thoughts? How he simply sighed, thinking, *"How unfortunate. This is a minor setback. I'll have to plan around her not being here, now... with me and Obito...well, planning with him involved will make things slightly more difficult..."*

"What, you're not going after her?!" Obito demanded, as if he couldn't believe it.

"Why? We have to complete the mission, otherwise we'll fail." Kakashi said this as if *not* doing the mission was completely incomprehensible.

Obito spluttered as he looked at Kakashi with a look of growing disbelief on his face. *"But...but she's our teammate!"*

"So? It's of no consequence to us. We don't need her to complete the mi-"

Kakashi was cut off when Obito punched him in the face.

Kakashi stumbled back, surprised, before glaring at Obito. But he couldn't hope to match Obito's glare in that moment.

"How can you say that, Kakashi?!" His eyes flashed red, tomoe swirling within his pupils. *"How can you even think to leave her behind?! Why are you so damn hung up on the fucking mission?!"*

"Shinobi who do not complete the mission are trash." Kakashi replied easily. Because they were. Because those who did not complete the mission were met with disappointment and failure.

"Oh, yeah?" Obito challenged. *"Well people who abandon their friends*

are worse than trash! If I'm gonna be called trash either way, then it'll be because I saved my friends!"

He had thought that Obito was a fool. He didn't need him. He could simply complete the mission on his own.

"Rin has saved our butts more than once, and she's saved your ungrateful ass more times than either of us could count! What about all those times we were injured? She could have left us bleeding, or with nasty scars, but look at us! Hardly a scratch! So we owe her!"

"You can go ahead, then." Kakashi said, even though a part of him was torn, even if only in the slightest way. *"I'll complete the mission. Someone here obviously has to do it."*

Obito suddenly let out a frustrated shout, and pointed at Kakashi. *"Your dad was right in saving his teammates, Kakashi. And you wanna know what? They absolutely suck ass for not thanking him for it! What dishonor? The only dishonor was them not getting down on their faces and thanking him for their lives! You should be proud of him!"*

"So I don't care what people say about me! Even if we fail this stupid mission, I'll go back to the village with my head held high!"

With that, Obito turned and ran in the direction that those men had taken Rin.

Kakashi silently watched Obito go, and simply turned in the opposite direction. He went ahead for almost twenty minutes, but thoughts of his father and Obito's words ran through his mind. His father had become the village disgrace; a blight on society. When he died, his name was not carved on the Memorial Stone, because people said it did not deserve to be there.

He remembered when Koshiro looked at him with that sad expression.

"Sakumo was right."

Obito was pointing at him, glaring, so angry and frustrated.

"Your dad was right in saving his teammates, Kakashi."

Rin...Kakashi stopped where he stood. Rin had been taken by those men... abruptly, thoughts of what disreputable men would possibly do to a vulnerable teenage girl flashed through his mind. They wouldn't do things like *that* to her...would they? Not that Rin was helpless; she

was the furthest thing from it...but they would tie her down... They would make sure she couldn't fight back.

If they failed the mission, and people demanded why, would they still be angry with them if he told them what they had potentially saved her *from*? Would they actually think that they should have let those horrible things happen to her? How would they even justify it? Would they even dare tell her parents to their faces that they thought her teammates should have left their daughter to be violated just to complete this particular mission?

Kakashi thought back to Koshiro.

"No, you're wrong, Kakashi-kun. Sakumo was right, in what he did. Those people are still alive, thanks to him—"

"Well, he's dead now, so what does it matter?"

What had Koshiro been trying to say before Kakashi had cut him off?

"Sakumo was right..." Kakashi muttered. *"Dammit..."*

Kakashi turned around and ran as fast as he could; pumping chakra into his legs so that he could run faster. He sent chakra into his senses, following his nose, looking and listening for Obito.

He had made it just in time, before Obito rushed in, because *of course* that's something he would do. Obito looked at Kakashi with an expression of relief and happiness. He grinned at him, in a way that he never had before.

"What's the plan?" Kakashi asked, ducking down on the tree limb next to his teammate and judging by the expression on Obito's face, he clearly hadn't thought that far ahead.

Kakashi bit back a sigh. *"Where are they?"*

"They're in there,"

Obito pointed to a small gorge that was a few hundred feet deep that narrowed further in, leading to a cave. Sections of the gorge had overhanging cliffs that certainly looked precarious. Kakashi mentally calculated the height of the cliffs and the width of the cave entrance. Just in case, because a Shinobi always assessed and used their environment to their advantage.

But that was when it happened:

An attack from behind. Something had alerted the enemy to their presence. Kakashi quickly defended himself against his much larger opponent, using his tanto. He turned briefly towards Obito.

"I'll take care of him, go get Rin!"

Obito hesitated only briefly, but he nodded and charged ahead.

If only he hadn't been injured by that man, maybe, just maybe, things would have somehow been different.

Kakashi ran into the cave not long after, and found that Obito had managed to take out the men, and he was currently untying Rin. She appeared to fine, and looked at both of them immensely relieved, with tears in her eyes.

She gasped when she saw Kakashi. *"Kakashi, your eye!"*

"It's fine, really..." Kakashi said, with a small smile. *"You can heal it later."*

"Let's get out of here!" Obito said, pulling Rin up.

Obito's eyes flashed red with the Sharingan, almost glowing with intensity in the darkness. Obito had finally developed his Sharingan almost two years ago. For the longest time, the "black sheep" of the Uchiha was considered even more of a failure, because his Clan had thought that the Sharingan had skipped him.

His Clan had been genuinely shocked when he showed them. The expressions on their faces showed that even the most ridged of Uchiha were capable of some outward emotion.

And they moved to exit the cave.

If only Kakashi had seen that one of the men wasn't dead. If only Kakashi had finished off his opponent earlier, and had been there to help Obito, then maybe he wouldn't have been so exhausted and he would have caught the slight movement. If only Kakashi had seen the Explosion Seals so well-hidden within the cave. If only he had been standing where Obito was...

The explosion shocked his senses, and he barely registered someone shouting his name with half of his vision gone and his ears ringing.

Suddenly someone slammed into him and he was rolling across the ground.

His ears were ringing, and everything was muffled. Dust clouded his vision even more, and it was a good thing that he was wearing a mask. There was a noise, and it took him a minute or two to register.

"Obito! Obito!" Rin was yelling.

Kakashi slowly pushed himself up, blinking his good eye. Why was Rin yelling? She sounded scared, and was trying her best not to panic. What was going on? His eye widened when he saw the reason for Rin's panic, and he barely noticed the pain that came with the action, because Obito's legs were buried, almost all the way up to his chest, under the rubble from the cave-in.

"We have to get him out!" Rin shouted. She began pulling the rocks away, and Kakashi moved to join her after assessing the rubble for a brief moment.

"I can't use any Earth Jutsu, dammit!" Kakashi cursed. Because if he did, he would risk crushing Obito even more, or even cause a rock slide that would crush them too. *"Don't worry, Obito, we'll get you out of this, and Rin can take care of you until we get back to the village!"*

Obito coughed as he laughed. *"Really, Kakashi...? What about the mission?"*

Kakashi glared down at Obito. *"Screw the mission! We have to get you out!"*

He pointedly ignored the surprised look on Rin's face and the smug grin that Obito somehow managed.

They only pulled a few more rocks out, when Obito's voice stopped them. *"Guys...stop...s...just stop, please...stop."*

"Why?" Rin turned to look at Obito, and Kakashi frowned underneath his mask.

"I...I can't feel my legs." Obito wasn't bothering to fight back tears. *"There's s-something else..."* Obito held up a hand that was covered in blood.

That was when the two teens noticed the blood that was slowly pooling around Obito and their feet. Rin let out a noise, as if she were

trying to hold back a sob, and Kakashi's mind sort of blanked when he saw his bloody footprints around the rubble. Kakashi's gaze went to where Obito was trapped and the stupid rocks that held him there. He was bleeding from an injury that was buried underneath the rubble.

Rin started crying as she desperately started pulling at the rocks again. *"Don't worry, Obito, we'll-we'll get you out of this, don't worry... right, Kakashi-kun?"*

"Y-yeah, let's hurry..." Kakashi was shaken, but he wouldn't show it, and he moved again. Desperately, trying to figure out the quickest way possible to get Obito out. *"We'll get you home, and—"*

Obito weakly grabbed Kakashi's pant leg. *"No. Just stop!"*

Both Rin and Kakashi did.

"There's no point. My legs don't work...even if you managed to get me out of this...and healed me, I'll only be a burden...you know how my family sees me...if I go back..." Obito shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut. He suppressed a sob. *"I...don't want to go back...not like...not like this."*

They were silent at that, because even though Kakashi and Obito antagonized each other, their team was Obito's escape.

"You don't know that." Kakashi finally forced out. *"Let us get you out, and Rin can..."* he stopped talking, because it was clear that Obito was no longer really focusing on him.

"I'm glad, Kakashi..." Obito smiled up at Kakashi as his eyes slowly started to dull. *"Hey, I just thought of the perfect gift..."*

Kakashi balked, because Obito *never* called him by his name, and this was the second time today in under two hours...and how could he be thinking of gifts right now?

"Rin, I want you to take my eye and give it to Kakashi."

"What?!" both teens cried out.

Obito just smiled through his pain and tears. *"D-didn't I tell you? ...I would get you a birth...day present so awesome, you'll never want...t-to throw it away..."* Obito smirked. *"...you'll use it for-for the rest...of your stupid life..."*

"How can you joke at a time like this?" Kakashi asked, his own tears

mixing with the blood and dirt on his face.

"I'll do it." Rin said, determinedly.

Within less than ten minutes, Kakashi now had Obito's Sharingan eye.

"I can heal the scar-" Rin started, but Kakashi pulled away.

"Leave the scar...please..."

He needed a reminder for why he had the eye.

Obito's face was scrunched, making him look as if he were giving a very pained wink. *"See the world for both of us, okay? Take care of Rin, for me, won't you, Kakashi?"*

"I-I promise." Kakashi said with a nod, doing his best to be strong at that moment. But he was failing. His voice had cracked.

If only that promise could have been fulfilled.

Obito gripped the kunai with the exploding tag attached as tightly as his weakened hand would let him.

"Good bye, Obito-kun." Rin kissed his forehead.

"Thank you, Obito." Kakashi awkwardly patted Obito's head like he would a dog, because he didn't know what else to do.

Obito just smiled at him.

A few more exploding tags were set up around the cliffs, and they would activate when the one in Obito's hand went off.

Kakashi and Rin stood a few miles away, listening to the explosion and watching as the gorge caved in. Rin had pulled Kakashi into a tight hug as she sobbed, and for once, Kakashi didn't stiffen in response to Human contact. Instead, he slowly put his arm around the girl, and stared at the place that was now his friend's grave.

If only they didn't have to go back and tell Minato the news. The man looked so shocked, and he looked at Kakashi with an expression that showed relief, somehow, but there was so much sadness and pain in that expression.

For a long time, Kakashi wondered if he had caused that pain.

If only, they hadn't been the ones to tell the Uchiha the news.

"It was my fault... I'm so sorry..." Kakashi profusely apologized, going so far as to let his forehead touch the ground.

"Get up." It was the voice of Obito's mother.

Kakashi slowly stood and looked up at her. She slapped the left side of his face, causing his still-healing wounds to throb, and he heard Minato saying something to her, but he didn't catch it over his ear ringing from how hard the woman had slapped him. Kakashi just walked away, not knowing what to say. If only he could have said something. They had demanded the eye back, but because Obito had given it to him as a dying wish; because it had already been placed; and because Minato had challenged them, they obviously never got it back.

"You Hatake bastards are nothing but trouble. One was a traitor and the other a thief."

They held Obito's funeral without a body, and neither Kakashi nor Rin were allowed to attend. Kakashi, because he had the eye, and Rin, because she had transferred it.

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The day after the Kyuubi attack, when Kakashi learned of his sensei and Kushina's deaths, he felt something inside him crumble.

"What about Naruto?"

"We have someone to take care of him," was the cold response.

If only Kakashi had said something like, *'But...he was my sensei...I was named his big brother...'*

If only he had said something, anything along those lines, but he was still reeling from Obito's death and now Minato's and Kushina's. If only he had had the courage to speak up when it mattered most, this was his sensei's son, his *flesh and blood* and Kakashi didn't even want to look at the boy. If only he hadn't have been so selfish.

But he was terrified: what if he couldn't protect him? What if he failed him like he did Obito?

Rin was angry and demanded that he step up, but yet he couldn't.

They wouldn't let her take Naruto for the same reasons they had given him. Rin had yelled at them, had cursed them with every name she could think of; it was so unlike her that the Council could do nothing but stare. But one of them had used her outburst as a reason to not let her keep Naruto.

"Far too emotional and unstable."

"Your emotional state is making you unpredictable. You are not fit to care for a child."

Rin had looked at him with such disappointment.

He was focused on his own pain and sadness, and there was a baby who needed someone and yet he couldn't bring himself to even care. It just hurt *so much*, words can't even begin to describe that type of pain, because how do you even begin to explain that? If only he hadn't have been so pathetic.

He had heard of the negotiations involving Naruto, and the politics behind them, and yet, this helpless child had no-one in the end, and Kakashi still couldn't bring himself to properly care.

So he always stood on the sidelines, afraid and feeling guilty for not being there when he should have been.

If only, he could have been the big brother Minato and Kushina imagined and needed him to be.

He always stood off to the side, never speaking to Naruto yet caring for him from a distance. It was why he always wore his ANBU outfit even on his days off. That way, people were aware of Naruto's guardian. The only time he never stepped in was when he was out on a mission.

It wasn't long after that Kakashi and Rin were out on a mission together, that they had gotten involved in a fight.

Both of them were exhausted and were short on chakra, and they were surrounded. Kakashi was desperately trying to get to Rin. Protect Rin! *Protect Rin!* Because, that was what he had promised Obito after all.

Kakashi can't remember how far away he was, but he saw the enemy Shinobi standing behind Rin as he raised his blade. He saw it glisten in the pale light. *"RIN! BEHIND YOU!"*

If only Rin had had time to turn. If only Kakashi had gotten there in time.

But everything seemed to slow down as the blade skewered her chest, and she fell.

He had defeated his opponents and hers, the sound of birds and the smell of burned flesh filling the air, and ran to her side. He tried to stop the bleeding, holding his shirt against her wounds, but there was so much blood, and his hands were covered in it. That look in Rin's eyes as she slowly faded out and away from him haunted him for so long (and still does) and his hands could never be cleaned of her blood.

He washed his hands so many times, rubbing them raw and seeing the blood run from them just made it worse and convinced him that he still had her blood covering him.

For the following years, Kakashi had nightmares involving not being able to move as Rin was stabbed over and over again, and she was begging and pleading for him to save her. Obito would crawl towards him; dragging and crumpling across the ground in unnatural movements before stopping in front of him with one Sharingan eye and the other an empty, bloody socket.

"Why did I give you my eye when you're not even using it properly? You promised to protect her."

Obito would slowly reach towards him with a bloody, mangled hand, and rip out the Sharingan.

Kakashi would wake up in a cold sweat every time he had that dream.

Slowly, Kakashi came to terms with the ghosts of his past. While Inoichi hadn't forced him to relive his worst memories, he had helped the man confront them and talk openly about them. Kakashi was finally laying their ghosts to rest. He wasn't sure how long he had been here, going back and forth from this room to the Mind Chamber so that Inoichi could work with him.

Inoichi and the Third Hokage were troubled, because if Kakashi had been faking being emotionally stable for so long, how many others were faking it? The Third frowned deeply as he thought about this entire situation. Perhaps he should make it a requirement for Shinobi to see the Yamanaka whenever they came back from certain missions or lost a teammate.

The events of October 10th were left alone, because if Kakashi was like this, and judging from his memories involving the boy, he wouldn't have let Naruto go so easily. Would he? But Inoichi had felt the suffocating levels of guilt and sadness when it came to Naruto, so not once did he even consider that Kakashi would willingly let the son of his late sensei go.

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It had been nearly two months since Zoro had left with Naruto, and in this case, no news was good news. He could hear people whispering; some their relief and others their concern. While no-one had shared with him directly the details of trying to track down Zoro, he knew that Jiraiya was on the case. Kakashi grimaced, hoping that Zoro wouldn't have to go up against the legendary Toad Sage. It hadn't been fair of him, asking so much of Zoro; especially when there were people like Jiraiya who would go after him.

While Kakashi was technically cleared for ANBU work, he was on a forced vacation to give him some reprieve. Sitting and doing nothing gave way to thinking and overthinking, and Kakashi was seriously considering retiring from his ANBU life and taking on a team or two. That had been one of Obito's dreams; to become an awesome sensei over a "cute Genin team". It was only right that Kakashi take on the role. Plus, it would probably give the Hokage some relief as well.

Later that afternoon, Kakashi made his way to the Memorial Stone to have one of his usual talks with Obito and Rin. He briefly noticed Itachi walking passed him on the opposite side of the road. There was a flash of red, when Kakashi suddenly found himself in a Genjutsu.

"Sorry about this, senpai" Itachi said, looking very serious. "But I have a message for you. Zoro said to tell you, 'the brat's doing fine'. I also have a scroll for you from Naruto."

And just like that, they kept on walking as if nothing had happened. Now, Kakashi had a scroll in his hands, surprise that he had an ally in Itachi for some unknown reason, relief that Naruto and Zoro were doing fine, and a newfound respect for Itachi's skills.

It was only until he reached the Memorial Stone that Kakashi read the scroll. He stared at the childish scrawl, and couldn't help but smile when he saw that even though Zoro had written various characters for Naruto, the boy had needlessly copied them so he could write them himself.

'Hey Dog-chan, Zoro-nii told me about you. You were supposed to be my older brother, or something, but people said that you couldn't. That's not fair.

But I remember you always being there when people were mean and you'd make them stop. You also gave me stuff and the snacks were always my favorite.

Zoro-nii said that you asked him to take care of me, and I sort of have a family now, I guess. There's Zoro-nii and Gaara – he's like me – he has a monster too. Gaara's really smart and strong, but he's got weird ideas sometimes.

Zoro-nii told me about my parents too. I wish I could talk to them, and I bet they'd like Zoro-nii and Gaara.

I want to be a super-strong Shinobi someday, and I want to come back to Konoha and show everyone just how awesome I am. I want to see you again too, and you can tell me about my parents. Would that be alright?'

Kakashi didn't realize how relieved he would be seeing that Naruto didn't hate him. He looked down at the scroll again, seeing Zoro's messy handwriting.

'Kakashi, let me tell you something Koshiro told me after Kuina died. It doesn't do much good to look at the past with regret wishing things could've been different. Don't focus on 'if only' and 'what ifs'.

Make sure you live your life without regrets, and don't focus on any regrets if you have them. Regrets like that'll ruin you.

You know, sensei wished things had been different with Kuina.

I sometimes wonder what if I hadn't asked her to use real swords that night, would she still be alive? I'll never know and thinking about that sort of thing will only hold me back in carrying out my dream and promise to her.

I guess what you can do now is focus on what you have. If you do become a teacher or something, do whatever you have to do to make sure there's no regrets involving them. Prepare them for the crazy life you Ninja have.

Don't worry about Naruto, Flea-Bag. He's got some promising

skills.

Another thing – sensei didn't want me telling people this because of safety reasons or whatever, but I've got a Kekkei Genkai. I'm descended from the Kūhaku, a Clan from around Kiri. That was how I got through the barrier. Sorry I wasn't completely honest with you.

-Zoro'

Honestly, Kakashi had to resist the urge to start laughing. That explained everything about Zoro!

He glanced down at the words again, and a sense of determination filled him. Kakashi decided right then and there, he was going to make sure that his team would be prepared for anything and everything; that they would stick together through everything; that they would not have to deal with the same losses that he did – not if he could help it.

Placing a hand on the Stone, Kakashi took a deep breath and looked at the names of his fallen comrades. He was finally letting them go.

"I'm going to do right by both of you," he whispered.

He was carrying the torch now, so he would prepare whatever team he got for the worst while making them the best. He would pass the Will of Fire onto them, and they would burn bright.

Chapter End Notes

I listened to 'Sadness and Sorrow' as I read through this, and got kinda emotional. Honestly, I felt Kakashi got gypped in his arc; like he never really recovered and wasn't suited to take on a genin team as he was when first introduced. Also, he probably wasn't the best fit as a sensei for the team that he had. Plus, I felt that there were aspects where he didn't get to truly move on.

For what reasons, those will not be listed as this is an A/N and shouldn't be as lengthy as it would need to be for me to give my opinion on the canon Team 7 matter.

So *minor spoilers* when Kakashi (and his team) show up, there will be quite a few changes (and surprises) But that's a long way off.

An Interlude of Sorts Pt. 2. – A Toad, a Slug, and Cold Resolve

Chapter Summary

Through various events, Konoha, Suna, and Kiri must ally themselves against a common enemy. Before they can move forward with any plans of war, though, Jiraiya decides to try and convince Tsunade to return so that she can put her healing skills to use. To make the story of Naruto traveling with him sound true enough, Haku accompanies Jiraiya to meet Tsunade.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is shorter than I would like, to be honest, but it was either a short chapter or a lengthy chapter that needlessly repeated what happened only a few chapters earlier. Anyhoo, it was a necessary detour for things to come.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Rasa stared at Mei incredulously as she spoke of inescapable mist barriers, Ancient Weapons, and the mad man that was the Third Mizukage who apparently wasn't as insane as everyone had initially presumed. When the infamous Kiri blood purges had started, it was something that the surrounding Countries had ignored, because how did it affect them? But the Hokage had put a small amount of concern into Rasa and his advisors with one observation:

"If we were to go along with Zabuza-san's theory that Arashi is possibly targeting Kekkei Genkai holders as some sort of sacrifice for this Hecate, who's to say he won't stop with his own Country? What if he starts advancing across the Elemental Nations?"

Being a Kekkei Genkai holder himself, that sort of put a target on his back; along with a few others who resided in Suna.

Mei scratched at the bandages covering the right side of her face in a brief moment of discomfort. "I agree...at first, we were planning to wait a few years when our coup failed before trying again. But knowing what we do, we might not have the luxury of waiting a few years. And if knowledge of this weapon gets out..."

"...There would be war." Hiruzen said with a sigh. "That's not exactly

something any of us want or can afford. Our ancestors Sealed this thing away for a reason. If someone were to have access to a weapon that destroys entire countries..."

It bothered all of them that Arashi somehow obtained this information from somewhere or someone. Hiruzen honestly considered possibly trying to detain Arashi and have one of the Yamanaka's have a look into his mind, but there was too much of a risk in keeping the man alive. Mei had nearly been killed by him, and it was only thanks to Zabuza pulling her out of the way that she only lost her eye.

There was a unanimous decision between the three Kage that Arashi needed to be stopped. Due to obvious reasons, Zoro's name and affiliation had been left out entirely, and the Kūhaku who had provided them this info in this case was someone who was just passing through, and wanted nothing to do with their war. He and Zabuza had just happened to cross paths when Zabuza encountered some of Arashi's men. So in an unwitting silent agreement, Jiraiya, Hiruzen, Zabuza, and Mei all conveniently left out Zoro's name and the fact that he had both Naruto and especially Gaara with him. Ignorance offered deniability, after all.

After they all agreed to work together, Jiraiya decided that they would need around a month of preparation for them to not only convince Tsunade, but to gather more healers from their combined hidden villages and train them for the upcoming war.

For Jiraiya, it was a way to get in Rasa's good graces, and give him some incentive to stay, while also meeting his concerns. He didn't have the whole story, but from what he had gathered from his sources, Gaara had been a loose cannon that killed and injured people at random. But hearing that and seeing how the kid had behaved with Zoro, Naruto, and even the Kiri-Nin... to put it bluntly, Rasa had screwed up somewhere, and his only solution was to try and off his own kid.

In Jiraiya's opinion, Rasa had been spread thin, considering that he had been making all these political moves. He had looked somewhat stressed, but that either could be from what he had been going through over the past few months; or what the meeting had been about; or maybe it was both.

If Gaara were to return to the Elemental Nations for whatever reason; and if Rasa was somehow there to witness it...well, they'd handle it as it came.

Both Mei and Rasa nodded in agreement, and Hiruzen could only sigh as he thought about what it would potentially take to convince Tsunade to return. Hell, she'd probably punch Jiraiya through a wall if he so much as breathed wrong.

"We'll discuss things further after Jiraiya returns, with or without Lady Tsunade. Either scenario will require planning on our parts."

Jiraiya wasn't sure if this plan to get Tsunade back would even work, but it was worth a shot. May the gods or whatever deity was out there wish him luck.

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And so, Haku found himself here with Jiraiya, hinged to looking like he had short blond hair, to fit the claims that Naruto was traveling with the Toad Sage. Haku was honestly torn between what he should think about the old man. He could certainly judge from their first encounter that Jiraiya was powerful; but when he wasn't fighting... well...

"Don't you want to read at least the *first* chapter of my book?" Jiraiya smirked and wiggled his eyebrows at Haku, who simply narrowed his eyes and frowned.

Eyeing the open fields, rice farms, woods, and even the mountains that were visible even from several hundred miles away, the teen shook his head. "No, thank you."

Jiraiya, the greatly feared Toad Sage – Haku had the misfortune and displeasure to realize – was a lecherous author. Haku had been around enough of these kinds of people – and he was in the unique position where he could actually sympathize with the women who had been the targets of unwanted wandering eyes and hands. So Haku crossed his arms and plainly stated, "I don't believe in reading such horrid drivel."

Zabuza-sama was a man who was always blunt and honest; had a fearsome presence, and depending on who he was with, the tone would soften and he would drop his guard. Very few ever saw that side of the man; and those people could probably be counted on one hand, give or take a few fingers. Haku felt that he could be counted among the lucky few who knew what Zabuza-sama was like. Somehow, Zoro-san had drawn out aspects of Zabuza-sama's true personality in a matter of days, instead of the months it had taken Haku. Honestly, to see Zabuza-sama lose the composure that he had

worked so hard to maintain so easily had made things fun and interesting. Zoro and the two boys certainly had some sort of impact on each of them.

Haku chose to ignore Jiraiya's gaping shocked expression, and trudged ahead, and the Toad Sage quickly recomposed himself.

"This is *art*, kid!" Jiraiya insisted as he held up an obnoxiously orange-colored book with colorful characters on the front. "Clearly, growing up in Kiri has left you deprived."

"Art?" Haku barely spared a glance before replying dryly, "The colors on the cover are horribly tacky."

Jiraiya paused and quickly turned the book around so he could look at the colors for himself. Before Jiraiya could argue that his publisher, cover artist, and a select few trusted friends had all agreed that this cover looked good, *and* it was meant to be eye-catching, Haku added,

"I survived fifteen years without reading it; I'm sure I can live the rest of my life without resorting to *that* level of desperation for reading material."

Jiraiya just about yelled out, "What kind of man are ya, kid?"

Haku honestly considered another scathing remark, but decided against it. Instead, he rolled his eyes and crossed his arms, and focused on the serene nature around him, choosing to ignore Jiraiya's bemoaning as best he could. Haku could only ask the Fates, the gods, any deity that might be listening: *Why me?*

Instead of focusing on his own misery, Haku then asked, "May I ask why you need *my* help convincing your old teammate to return?"

Jiraiya straightened, and stuffed the book into one of his pockets; his facial features looking grim.

"I know that she's semi-defected, but that's all, really..."

Expecting this, Jiraiya sighed. "It's a long story...but it seems we have time."

Looking up at the sky, he continued, "For one thing, Tsunade had plans at one point for seeking out an ice-user because she believed that there would be ways to incorporate various cryotherapy methods beyond what most medics who merely learned Ice Jutsu could do.

Honestly, her ideas were often drunken ramblings, but it certainly sounded innovative enough.

"But things went downhill for her. It started with Nawaki, her younger brother. Kid was a bit of a brat, but he wasn't too bad compared to others. Had aspirations of being Hokage, but..."

Considering the used past tense, Haku could only conclude, "He died, didn't he."

Nodding, Jiraiya said, "Out on the battlefield. He was twelve; just barely out of the academy. If there had been a Medic-Nin out there at the time, then he wouldn't have died. Tsunade was devastated, of course. So she campaigned to have Medic-Nin have more diverse skills.

"If they could fight *and* heal, then there was less of a chance of someone dying. During this time, she met Dan. He fully backed her. Dan was someone who had a lot of influence, and if he believed in a cause, people were bound to listen. With Tsunade's determination and Dan's influence, they persuaded the Council to start training their Medic-Nin in both combat and healing Jutsu."

Haku frowned. Once again, there was the use of the past tense.

"They were out on a mission, and Dan was severely injured. Tsunade fought to save him, but...as skilled as she was, she couldn't save him. Maybe if there had been one other Medic-Nin there, he would have survived long enough for them to get him to the tents with all the supplies necessary, but..." Jiraiya shook his head. "Dan's wounds were too extensive and spread out. His wounds..." Jiraiya wondered if he should share the details, but considering the kid might have to face such a situation in the near future, he said, "His wounds were spread out in a way that he was bleeding internally in more than one place."

It had been a race against time that was lost no matter which way was taken. Dan had been wounded in his chest and stomach; and he had massive internal bleeding around his vital organs. It all had happened so fast, and Jiraiya recalled the utterly defeated look on Tsunade's face as she stared at her hands with Dan's dried blood on them. How she threw up when someone was talking to her about Dan's injuries. How she glared at him as he tried to tell her none of this was her fault. How she froze up when she was supposed to heal someone else. The way she screamed and yelled at Hiruzen and flipped him her middle finger as she left the village. She had punched Jiraiya through a wall

and told him to "fuck off" and leave her alone. She was no longer interested in fighting for Konoha, because she saw it as a place that simply took everything that was precious away from her. Jiraiya spared Haku all those personal details, but he figured the kid should at least have the gist of the situation.

Haku stared at the road ahead, his eyes somber. "I see."

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Thanks to his contacts, Jiraiya already knew where to look. It was a fairly decent-sized village that was just out of the way enough to not garner any unwanted attention; yet big enough to gain plenty of foot-traffic from travelers and merchants alike. Even the occasional Ninja would pass through.

Haku happened to catch a glance of his reflection in a shop window; and he looked like a tomboyish girl. He briefly wondered if he should drop the henge so that Tsunade wouldn't think they were somehow trying anything. Well, all that was really changed was his hair, so it wasn't like it mattered.

Fortunately, people left them alone as they walked leisurely through the town. A few men glanced Haku's way, but he pointedly ignored them. A few women glanced his way too, although their expressions looked almost jealous. Haku scoffed internally. Civilians. He knew plenty of Kunoichi who shared their beauty secrets for covering up blemishes and scars. Petty jealousy over who was the prettiest wasn't exactly a thing amongst Kiri's Kunoichi.

Walking passed a bar, Jiraiya spotted Tsunade through a window pretty much right away. She hadn't really changed much considering how many years it had been. She still wore the pigtails and revealing top. A woman with black hair sat at the bar next to her, holding a small pig.

"Hello, Tsunade." Jiraiya greeted somewhat jovially as he entered the small bar. Tsunade glared rusty kunai at him. "Long time no see."

"What the fuck do you want, Jiraiya?" Tsunade asked with a biting tone. "I thought I told you I wasn't interested in Konoha's affairs. That's why you're here, isn't it?"

Her eyes glanced over at Haku, and she raised an eyebrow. "You liking them younger, old man?"

"What?! No!" Jiraiya denied.

"Or..." Tsunade smirked. "Maybe you're swinging *that* way? Didn't know you had it in you."

"EH! Tsunade-sama, that's not nice!" the black-haired woman admonished.

"Really?" The Toad Sage questioned flatly.

"Don't be disgusting!" Haku shouted, infuriated.

Tsunade scoffed, and turned back to the bar. She waved an empty sake bottle in the air. "Oi, bartender! Give me another one!"

There were only a few other people in the bar who were locals, and they observed the odd conversation with some amusement and curiosity. The barkeeper sighed due to Tsunade's volume, but he was thankful that she wasn't in a break-something mood. He set another bottle of sake in front of her and took away the empty one.

Jiraiya sat down at the bar, and Haku followed.

"What'll it be?" the barkeep asked.

"Sake for me."

"And for the lady?"

"Oh...um," Haku tapped his chin and looked innocent. "Juice? Whatever you have. Oh, and for the record..." the temperature dropped ever so slightly, and Haku glared icicles at the barkeep. "I'm a boy."

The barkeeper's jaw dropped, and Tsunade snorted. The woman on Tsunade's other side looked at Haku as if seeing him for the first time.

"You're a *guy*?!"

Haku was now all pleasant smiles and upmost politeness. "Yes. I'm Haku. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Shizune. Nice to meet you as well." Shizune indicated the pig in her arms. "This is Tonton."

"Buu~!" Tonton greeted happily.

"Ugh, don't be getting friendly with them, Shizune." Tsunade grumbled bitterly.

Shizune frowned, and didn't respond. By now, the barkeeper had served Jiraiya and Haku their drinks, and he made a hasty retreat to busy himself with something at the opposite end from where they sat.

"I'd like to talk to you, Tsunade." Jiraiya said, and he didn't miss the way Tsunade stiffened.

"Does this have to do with the rumors of Konoha getting mixed up in some war?"

"Well, I'd rather discuss it in private, but...pretty much, yeah."

"*Not. Interested.*" Tsunade spat out. The sake cup in her hand broke into several pieces, and Tsunade cursed. She practically snarled, "Barkeep! Get me another glass over here! NOW!"

She practically swiveled in her seat towards Jiraiya, glaring. "I told you before, *how* long ago? It's been nearly twenty years, and I'm still not changing my mind. No. I'm *not* coming back to Konoha. So you can tell our old sensei to go fu—"

"Tsunade-sama, that's not very polite!" Shizune admonished. She shivered when Tsunade's icy gaze landed on her, but she didn't back down. "The Third may not be your favorite person, but he's *still* due respect."

"*Tch!* Whatever."

"Listen, please. Just for a moment." Jiraiya said. "There's a pretty big conflict coming, and I can't share all the details here, but that's not the only reason I'm here."

At least, Tsunade quirked her eyebrow and looked at Jiraiya skeptically. "I'm not posing naked for you."

Haku coughed as he swallowed down the wrong pipe, and Shizune admonished Tsunade again. Tsunade downed her sake cup shamelessly and filled it again. Jiraiya sighed, and massaged his temples. "Alright, as much as a part of me would enjoy that, I know better not to ask anyway. Besides, there's a kid back in Konoha," Tsunade's eyes narrowed dangerously at him, and he ignored her gaze as he said, "who's from the Kaguya Clan, and he just so happens to be the sole carrier of their Kekkei Genkai."

Tsunade's eyes widened ever so slightly, and she could easily figure out why Jiraiya would even bring up such a thing to her. Ever so bluntly, she said, "Let me guess...that Clan's inbreeding finally resulted in a working model, but it's defective?"

"Yep. Whenever he activates his abilities, it's slowly poisoning him. Something about how his bones absorb nutrients was what he said."

"Um, excuse me..." Shizune said, genuinely excited at the prospect of not only meeting but treating a Kaguya. "But just where did you find a Kaguya? I was never under the impression that they would let one of their own go; especially if he has their Kekkei Genkai."

Jiraiya could only smirk. "Well, a *Kiri no Yuurei* sort of came along. That's another story."

"*Kiri no Yuurei*? Wait... Are you talking about the people from one of those *ridiculous ghost stories*?" Tsunade scoffed, and shook her head, muttering about Jiraiya and his stupid riddles under her breath. She wouldn't look at him as she asked accusingly, "So why didn't you bring him here?"

"Because, health reasons. Plus, Haku here not only has basic knowledge in making medicine, he's also interested in learning Healing Jutsu. The fact that he's a Kagayaki just might seal the deal. Want to take on an apprentice?" He nodded at Shizune.

"Well, *another* one?"

Tsunade would have found herself *extremely* interested if it hadn't been for...

Shizune on the other hand, was ecstatic. "A Kagayaki?! That's amazing! You know so many interesting people Jiraiya-sama!"

There had been a time that Tsunade was curious about how someone with an ice element would do with the healing arts. There was so much theory and potential there, and she had believed that it would revolutionize the medical field, but it had always been a crazy theory and natural ice-element users were rare. She would have continued trying though, and Dan had believed... Tsunade held back on breaking her cup *again*.

"Tsunade-sama, this is incredible luck! We can finally start testing your theories!" Shizune's voice was grating on Tsunade's nerves. "She totally can take on another apprentice, I've already learned-!"

"Shizune, stop talking." Tsunade's voice was barely a whisper. Giving the wall across from her one of her glares, she now spoke aloud. "I'm *not* interested in taking on another apprentice. So that brat can just go back to wherever it is he came from. Now, if you bring that Kaguya brat *here*, I'll more than happily heal him, and then everyone can be on their merry little way and you leave me the hell alone!"

A few people slowly got up from their tables, paid, and hastily left the bar. Someone was entering, but as soon as he heard Tsunade yelling, he quickly turned and left. While Tsunade was pretty entertaining while drunk, she was best avoided while being drunk *and* angry.

Now, Haku stood up. "Please, Tsunade-sama! Even if you only help Kimimaro, at least allow me to learn from you! I can only do so much with herbs and the knowledge that I have..."

"You have friends and family you care about, kid?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then you're better off not knowing how to heal so you can avoid being crushed when you fail."

"But..." Haku started, before he stood straight and clenched his fists. He didn't follow that train of logic nor did he like it. "I *need* to learn how to master the healing arts so that I can assist my comrades." Haku bowed. "So please, allow me to learn from you."

"I said 'no'. Get it through your thick skull, kid."

"Please, teach me! I have to be able to learn!" Haku insisted, standing straight once more. "I have precious people, people that I would die for..." Haku stopped, as he thought of what Zoro had told him after he had tried to take a deadly hit for Zabuza. "I don't want them dying, so I have to be able to *save* them!"

"You aren't the only one who doesn't want their friends to die." Tsunade grimaced. "Look, kid – you've got passion; I'll give you that. But the answer's still 'no'. I'm saving you from the disappointment of failure when you can't save your 'precious people'."

Haku was about to argue and reason again, but he paused for a moment before thinking. He then gave Tsunade a mild glare. "You've given up."

Tsunade blinked. "What? What do you mean by that?"

"There are people in my country who are suffering *right now*, and you aren't willing to help them! Even if it's simply allowing me to be your apprentice, you could at least let me learn from you so that I can save people from dying if you aren't willing to treat them yourself! I *want* to be able to save my friends and my allies when the time comes!"

Tsunade scoffed. "You really think you can save them? That's wishful thinking, kid. You can go ahead and try to save your friends, but in the end, your efforts will be meaningless. They'll all die, and you can do nothing but watch as their life slips through your fingers."

Shizune gasped. "Tsunade-sama!"

"Hey, Tsunade, you could at least have a little more tact." Jiraiya said, hoping that Tsunade wouldn't be tempted to break something or *someone*.

Haku stared at Tsunade. He could hear the bitterness and sadness in her voice.

"Please, don't give up, Tsunade-hime." Haku said quietly.

"This is the real world kid, you're going to have to learn to deal with it."

The temperature in the room suddenly dropped exponentially. It was different from when Haku had gotten annoyed at the bartender for mixing up his gender. Ice exploded out around him, but Haku quickly reigned it in before it impaled anyone. The adults sitting at the bar were staring at him in shock, and Tonton squealed at an icicle that was too close for comfort. Now, everyone else who had been sitting at the tables quickly exited the building, not wanting to get mixed up in the confrontation

"I've known about the *real world* since I was *four*." Haku spat the words, and Jiraiya was blinking at the kid, because he honestly had no idea the boy could get *this* angry. "This was *exactly* how I *killed my own father* when he tried to *kill me* after he *killed my mother*! My country is *suffering*, because a madman claims that Kekkei Genkai holders are a threat! You've given up on saving *hundreds* of lives simply because you couldn't save *two*!"

Oh, no. Jiraiya's eyes widened and Shizune gasped and covered her mouth with a hand while Tonton snorted in mild fear as Tsunade's chakra-infused fist hit the counter, effectively splintering it.

Meanwhile the barkeeper just stared at the spectacle taking place in his bar. He gaped at the display for a moment before quickly muttering some excuse about needing something from the storeroom in the back. Maybe if he stayed in there for a few minutes, he wouldn't get pulled into whatever was going on.

Tsunade grabbed Haku's vest and pulled him towards her until their noses were practically touching. "You care to repeat that, brat?"

"You've given up because you failed to save two."

Haku found himself thrown through a wall. As he laid there, in slightly numbing pain, it gave him a moment to calm down. Alright, he deserved that. What he had said was a low-blow. He had spoken out of anger, and now, he had potentially ruined everything. Would Tsunade even still be willing to heal Kimimaro?

"Listen here, brat! I'm giving you exactly five seconds to apologize! One...!"

"I'm sorry." Haku said quietly as he stood up. Tsunade actually stopped and blinked in surprise. "What I said was out of line. Please...even if you don't accept my apology, at least will you still heal Kimimaro? He shouldn't have to suffer because of my foolishness."

A part of Tsunade felt slightly guilty that the boy thought she would revoke her offer to heal this Kaguya kid.

"Will you at least listen to what I have to say, and then...I guess I'll go. Jiraiya-sama can talk to you more if he wishes."

Tsunade waved a hand as an indication for Haku to continue.

"You are very lucky that you've found precious people that you can trust and show emotions so openly with. This place is relatively peaceful, is it not? I wish the children back home could know this kind of peace..."

"I'm envious of you Konoha-Nin, because the stories about how you and your comrades stick together sounds too good to be true. But earlier, when I heard you talking, even though you two don't see eye-to-eye, you could still have banter. Back in Kiri, we don't have that luxury. Not really. Nearly everyone betrays someone else because they don't trust them. They know to betray first before being betrayed."

"Finding those precious comrades you are willing to give up your own

life for is a rare thing, and you are very lucky if you can find them."

Shinobi often had to act indifferent towards their comrades, no matter what. Anyone and everyone was a potential enemy until they knew for certain that they had someone they could trust wholeheartedly by their side. That guard only dropped piece by piece, and only when two people had known each other for months or even years. But more often than not, Kiri-Nin were loners who learned to work with others out of requirement rather than comradery. It was best to trust only oneself for most people who had been too jaded by Kiri for any number of reasons.

One of Mei's goals was to have peace much like Fire Country did; where men like Gato couldn't exploit locals and the country's local Nin didn't have to resort to working like common thugs. Mei was a Kunoichi with pride and high-standards, and she wanted her fellow countrymen to share them; because they were *above* doing the work of thugs. While Ninja obviously weren't the shining example of honor and valor, many had a *nindo* that spoke volumes about their character.

"Isn't it cruel that the man who is the closest thing I have to family wouldn't have been able to mourn my death when I was more than willing to die for him... he would have had to act like my death was meaningless, and even mock it to make him seem cold and heartless mere moments after my death? That's not really fair is it? But it is a cruel reality we all face."

Haku thought of Akiko, a woman who had been skilled with a kusarigama, and how he had emotionlessly watched her die at his feet as she bled out, and how his voice was cold as he lamented her loss as if he had broken a sandal. The last thing Akiko had seen was the face of a comrade who couldn't even comfort her and cry for her during her final moments because there were enemy witnesses who would realize that he cared for his comrades and could potentially use that against him.

Haku let out a soft snort. "I was willing to die for Zabuza-sama's dream of seeing a free Kirigakure. But someone pointed out to me that his dream is meaningless if I'm not alive to be there with him to enjoy it." Haku smiled sadly, thinking of Zoro. He didn't know everything, but he knew that Zoro had shared a promise with his dead friend. "I don't want to imagine any of them dying, but at least...at least I fought to save them...at least I tried." Haku looked at Tsunade with a determined expression. "If I failed to save them, the least I could do is carry out their dream for them."

Haku looked at Tsunade with equal parts determination and sadness. "It wasn't fair what happened to your precious people...either of them." Tsunade stiffened at his words. "...I know that this is asking a lot of you, Tsunade-sama. But if you help us out here, right now, we can at least let the current generation know peace, even if just for a little while."

Haku now bowed low, his forehead touching the ground. "So please, Tsunade-sama...help me be able to carry out the dreams of my precious people."

Tsunade stared at the boy before her. His speech had been genuine and passionate, and he was at least willing to admit when he was wrong, and apologize for it. But the harsh truth was she *had* given up, and no-one else had really called her out on it. At least, not to her face. Tsunade had heard the rumors and the whispers, and people valued their well-being too much to say those things to her face.

Tsunade didn't want to see anyone else die; not after Nawaki and Dan. She didn't want to fail saving someone else when their lives were on the line. Her thought process after Dan had been, 'If they were going to die anyway, why even try?' This kid had apparently lived his entire life losing people he cared about and wanted it to stop. It was almost enviable, the way that Haku held onto that hope for better things for a country that held the name 'Bloody Mist' for a reason.

And to think, Zabuza, the Demon of the Mist himself (who else could it be?) wanted a free Kirigakure! It apparently was much more than a simple overthrowing of government, even if the Third Mizukage was a nut-job that was leading his country to ruin.

"If I failed to save them, the least I could do is carry out their dream for them."

Both Nawaki and Dan had dreams that they never achieved; and what had she done? She spat at and cursed those dreams for taking away those she loved. Above all else; if she looked in between the lines, Haku sounded tired. Tired of people not being able to carry out their dreams, so he was willing to do it for them.

He sounded just as tired as she did. Tsunade sighed heavily as she looked at Haku. Damn, if the kid could make her sit back and *think*; the very thing she had been avoiding. Tsunade wasn't sure what good she could do. A part of her still had fear and doubt, but yet... there was hope. A small flame in the darkness that had the potential to burn

bright.

"Get up, brat." Tsunade ordered. "It's embarrassing, and you're causing a scene."

Haku resisted the urge to call out, 'that was because of you!' and he wondered if that odd, pulling energy that surrounded Zoro had lingered with him somehow. Instead, he just nodded, and felt relieved that his in the moment speech had actually worked, because he didn't even think it would.

"Let's get going then. I want more than just this kid working under me, got it? And if him or anyone else doesn't rise to my expectations, I'm throwing them out. *Literally*. And another thing: I want all the sake I can drink."

Jiraiya smiled. "Of course."

The Toad Sage gave the wide-eyed bartender an apologetic nod and placed a small bag of money on a dust-and-debris covered table. With a wave, he walked out the newly acquired hole and joined the women and Haku.

As they walked away, Haku couldn't help but laugh. At the questioning gazes around him, Haku said, "You remind me of a friend of mine. Zoro-san loves his sake, too. He was so mad that some guy broke his cheap bottle of alcohol that he crushed one guy with giant weights and cut off the head of another."

"WHHAAATTTTT?!" Shizune practically shouted.

Haku shrugged. "Of course, he could've been mad because they also threatened his brothers, took his swords, and told him he had no choice but to work for them. He didn't take being told what to do well."

"Zoro, Zoro..." Shizune muttered for a moment before she abruptly stopped walking. "When you say 'Zoro', you don't mean Roronoa Zoro do you? That odd boy who carries three swords?"

Haku smiled. "He saved our lives; mine, Zabuza-sama's and Kimimaro's. We owe him quite a debt."

Shizune started walking again, getting engaged in a conversation with Haku about Zoro. She had been curious about him ever since rumors started about a crazy kid with three swords who showed up out of

nowhere.

Now, Tsunade's curiosity was peaked. "Who exactly is this kid?"

Jiraiya smirked as he whispered, "He's a Kūhaku; one of the *Kiri no Yuurei*."

Tsunade turned on her heel and looked at Jiraiya. "You mean you were *serious*? Those stupid stories are *real*?"

"Only bits and pieces." Jiraiya replied with a lopsided shrug. "But wait until we get back to the village, and there's a lot more we have to tell you about Zoro."

Tsunade honestly didn't think that things could get anymore strange or crazy. But when she was informed of attempted coups, attempted genocides, mist barriers, Ancient Weapons...oh, and to top it off, this Kūhaku Zoro kid was taking care of *both* Naruto and Gaara *outside* of the barrier; Tsunade didn't think she had ever drank so much in her life in one sitting.

What exactly had she gotten herself into?

-O-O-O-

Somewhere on a boat in East Blue:

Zoro sneezed, and sneezed again. How many times over the past few days had it been? He'd lost count.

"Maybe you're developing an infection." Gaara said seriously.

"I don't get sick." Zoro replied, wiping his nose with the back of his arm. He'd never been sick a day in his life. He had mentioned as much.

"Please take care of your health, Zoro-nii!" Naruto said somewhat worriedly.

"Infections can kill you. It'll probably spread to us and it'll be the start of a plague."

Zoro scowled and flicked Gaara on the forehead. "Stop with the morbid commentary sand-brat."

"Why do you have to say that?" Naruto muttered, a part of him *almost* believing Gaara because of how sincerely he had said it.

Gaara just offered a not very innocent smile – one he made when he was joking. Messing with people like this was rather fun.

"ACHOO!" Zoro cursed as he sneezed again. Who the hell was talking about him so much?

Chapter End Notes

Kagayaki – Brinicle – A brinicle (brine icicle, also known as ice stalactite) is a downward growing hollow tube of ice enclosing a plume of descending brine that is formed beneath developing sea ice.

As sea water freezes in the polar oceans, salt brine concentrates are expelled from the sea ice, creating a downward flow of dense, extremely cold and saline water with a lower freezing point than the surrounding water. When this plume comes into contact with the neighboring ocean water, its extremely cold temperature causes ice to instantly be formed around the flow. This creates a hollow stalactite or icicle, referred to as a brinicle.

In certain parts of Eastern Asia, particularly in Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Vietnamese culture, a sneeze without an obvious cause was generally perceived as a sign that someone was talking about the sneezer at that very moment. This can be seen in the Book of Songs (a collection of Chinese poems) in ancient China as early as 1000 BC, and this belief is still depicted in present-day manga and anime. In China, Vietnam, South Korea, and Japan, for instance, there is a superstition that if talking behind someone's back causes the person being talked about to sneeze; as such, the sneezer can tell if something good is being said (one sneeze), something bad is being said (two sneezes in a row), even if someone is in love with them (three sneezes in a row) or if this is a sign that they are about to catch a cold (multiple sneezes).

An Interlude of Sorts Pt. 3– Koshiro, the Man Who Left it All Behind

Chapter Summary

Koshiro wasn't sure where it all went wrong; maybe everything was broken from the beginning. There's only so much a man can handle before he breaks.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Koshiro had been born in Konoha to a Shinobi couple who had both come from civilian families. His genius with swords was obvious at an early age, and his skill was on par with even the children from Clan families. While Koshiro was proud that he could keep up and even at times surpass the students from Clans, he never let that pride go to his head.

His father often told him, *"While you can be proud of your skills and hard work; never let pride consume you. It will make you complacent; it will make you foolish; it will make you think that you are better than you really are; and it will kill you. Know that you always have room to grow."*

Koshiro was a serious child, and he took his father's advice to heart, and was constantly training to improve and be stronger than he was yesterday. While both of his parents were extremely skilled with various weapons, Koshiro preferred swords – usually the katana the Samurai were known to use.

When Koshiro had first started at the academy, there were a few of the Clan members' children who were either jealous or thought that a 'civilian' like Koshiro should know his place. One day, they confronted him, and Koshiro easily dispatched them with his *bokken*. He simply gave them a casual glance, and flicked his sword, and started to walk away.

That was when a voice said, *"Wow that was impressive."*

Koshiro glanced upwards to the trees to see a boy close to his age with messy white hair pulled into a ponytail sitting on a tree's limb. The casual, yet somehow also humorous tone of his voice made it difficult for Koshiro to tell where the boy was directing his comment.

"*Sakumo-kun!*" one of the others called, sounding relieved.

'Sakumo' simply jumped down from his spot on the tree and pulled out a blunted tanto. He smiled at Koshiro. "*Fight me.*"

And with that, he charged forward. For once, Koshiro was kept on his toes. He and Sakumo traded blows, and Koshiro could feel his hands sting and muscles strain. He wasn't sure how long the fight had lasted, but he found that he was enjoying himself.

When Koshiro went to block one of Sakumo's attacks, he quickly had to dodge a kunai that Sakumo had pulled out. That was when Sakumo knocked the *bokken* out of his hand and shoved him to the ground, jarring his glasses, and held his tanto to Koshiro's throat.

"*You cheated.*" Koshiro said with a glare over his crooked glasses.

Sakumo just shrugged casually with a sort of half-smile. "*I'm a Shinobi. We have no honor.*"

The others cheered.

"*Go Sakumo!*"

"*Yeah, you put that guy in his place!*"

Sakumo put his tanto away, and held out a hand to Koshiro. Koshiro glanced at the outstretched hand for a moment before taking it hesitantly. Sakumo easily pulled him up and smiled that odd smile of his.

"*That was the first time I actually had to work hard to win against one of my classmates. If I hadn't have used that kunai, you probably would have won.*" Sakumo scratched the back of his head sheepishly. "*I was actually getting tired...*"

Koshiro (along with his other classmates) were looking at Sakumo incredulously.

"*I just wanted to see how strong you were, those guys,*" Sakumo indicated the others with a nod, "*wouldn't stop talking about it.*"

Adjusting his glasses, Koshiro raised an eyebrow.

Sakumo walked over to where Koshiro's *bokken* had landed, and picked it up, a smirk replaced the smile as he held the *bokken* out to Koshiro. "*Do you want to meet up a few times a week to spar?*"

Koshiro was mildly taken aback. *"Uh, okay?"*

"Great!" Sakumo said jovially as he patted Koshiro's shoulder with enough force that Koshiro's glasses went crooked once again. *"Ah! Right, I almost forgot! I'm Hatake Sakumo."*

"Chikuma Koshiro..." Koshiro said, trying but failing to keep the irritation out of his voice at having to straighten his glasses again.

Sakumo just grinned.

It was the start of their friendship.

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Both had hoped that they would be on the same team when the time came, but it was not to be. But they still spent any time they could together on their days off. The two young men enjoyed their sparring matches, practicing Jutsu, or simply talking. They balanced each other out in an odd way, and it often left others wondering why they hadn't initially been placed on the same team in the first place. But the Third Hokage and the academy teachers had their reasons for it.

Where Koshiro was stern and a stickler for rules, Sakumo was easy-going and spontaneous. They were close like brothers, and when Sakumo eventually got married, it was Koshiro who was Sakumo's best-man. Koshiro was there for Sakumo when he and his wife had their first and only child; a son they named Kakashi. He was there for Sakumo when his wife died while out on a mission. Koshiro was named as Kakashi's uncle, considering that he spent enough time around the Hatake household that he might as well just be another family member.

Koshiro often practiced his Kenjutsu with Kakashi watching, and the boy was far too serious in Koshiro's opinion – as if he were one to talk. While he took after his father in appearance, the boy took after his mother's stern personality. Kakashi never really understood Koshiro's little attempts here and there to teach him Kenjutsu and chakra control, along with not cutting anything with a sword.

"A sword that cuts everything cuts nothing; a sword that cuts nothing can cut anything."

Kakashi would look at him with a judgmental look that only a child could muster, saying, *"That makes no sense, Koshiro-san."*

"Keep up with your sword training, and you'll understand someday." Koshiro would respond with a smile.

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While the Hatake Clan specialized in Nin-ken, Koshiro's attention was drawn to the Toads. The Toads were known for keeping scrolls that contained powerful Jutsu among other things. A few of them were even powerful Kenjutsu-users. It often took years of hard work and tests to earn the right to even learn these techniques; much less even be able to look at the scrolls that housed these Jutsu. Summoned Toads could even transport their Summoner back to their own home, which was considered to be a different plane of existence altogether. Although he found it fascinating, Koshiro stopped trying to understand how it all worked.

One day, Koshiro went to the Toads' Realm so that he could read a few scrolls that didn't contain Jutsu; but rather focused around the Toads' history, and the various Clans that once was in Konoha. The Toads often teased him about not wanting to learn Sage Mode, but they were impressed at a Human who would rather pursue knowledge instead of power.

One of the Toads, Gamakuro, a black Toad with yellow and red spots and wide, yellow-and-green eyes, and was the size of a small house; considered young by the Toads' standards, was looking at something intently as he sat upon a rock. It looked like some sort of paper, but it wasn't like anything Koshiro had seen before. He couldn't help but be curious.

"What do you have there, Gamakuro-san?"

Gamakuro jolted in surprise, and quickly shoved the papers under himself.

"Oh... Koshiro-kun, it's you!" Gamakuro paused briefly, thinking over what he was about to do, and looked around, before motioning to Koshiro conspiratorially. *"Can you keep a secret, Koshiro-kun?"*

"That depends on what it is." Koshiro replied, not moving yet.

"No-one's getting hurt by this, I promise!" Gamakuro said quickly. *"It's just...I don't want them to take it away from me or tell me to not go there anymore..."*

Koshiro nodded, and relented. He leaned in to look at whatever it was

that Gamakuro was hiding.

The sheets of paper were...odd. They were pictures of odd-looking people; their proportions seemed *off* somehow; and some of them even looking like they had fish attributes, surrounded by words he couldn't read but had a few letters he could recognize. Judging by the numbers underneath the pictures themselves, they had to be something like people in the Bingo Books. And there were people who had numerous zeros to their bounties.

Those were a lot of zeroes...

"What are these?"

"I don't know!" Gamakuro said excitedly. *"Come here, I have more!"*

Koshiro followed Gamakuro as the Toad led him to his hut. Gamakuro then proceeded to pull out books – those had been ruined by exposure to water, given how the pages were faded and worn, newspapers, and two odd compass-like devices covered in glass bubbles. One was housed in a small, wood block while another was mounted on a bracelet, but this one was broken. There was a black flag with a stylized skull, but there were more items, not water damaged. There were illustrated pictures of sea monsters that rivaled mountains and there were even a few small toys in Gamakuro's collection.

Gamakuro was rapidly becoming more and more excited, *"I found them washed up on a beach... well, the beach is sort of hidden away by overgrown plants and trees, and you have to dive deep underwater and go through these pillars and arches with Seals, and a lot of stuff is broken, but it's so exciting! Look, I have more!"*

Gamakuro pulled out a few maps. *"I wish could read these, but I managed to learn that this place,"* the Toad pointed to one of the maps, *"is called 'East Blue', that's where the beach is. This one-this is 'South Blue', and this place, here, it's called...um...Grand Line! That's it, Grand Line! I don't know why, but these things here, they're called 'Calm Belts'."*

Koshiro tried to wrap his head around what he was looking at. These maps were far too detailed to be forgeries or even something that someone would make up. The faded handwriting on each of them was different, and there were even a few maps that had been stained by the artist's fingerprints, and two of the maps were messily drawn, as if it were the first time someone had drawn such a thing.

"I...I also swam out to one of the other islands..." Gamakuro admitted

guiltily, but the look in his yellow eyes said that he was anything but. *"There are people there, Koshiro-san! But they don't seem to have chakra at all, and they don't have Shinobi either, and-and there are people on ships – sometimes big ships, sometimes with those flags, but they all look different!"*

Koshiro wondered if he should tell anyone about this. They likely wouldn't believe him; not unless he brought them some of these objects, but that would mean taking some of Gamakuro's secret hoard.

"You won't tell anyone, right? You promise?"

Koshiro looked up at Gamakuro, and decided not to say anything. This was obviously something precious to the Toad, and Koshiro valued his friendship with the Toad more than sharing whatever these items were with others. Besides, Gamakuro had only shared this with him *because* of their friendship...to lose the trust of a Summons, no matter what they were, was a dangerous folly. Besides, from what he understood, it sounded like a lot of work just to get to this beach no matter which way the Toad was heading. So Koshiro just smiled, and handed the maps back to the Toad.

"I promise. If you get more by the next time I come, I'd like to see it. If that's alright?"

Gamakuro looked at Koshiro with such wide eyes, the man sweated nervously at the Toad's building excitement.

"OF COURSE I WILL!"

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The day came when Koshiro's world fell apart. He and some other Shinobi were in a small skirmish with Iwa during a mission. They had come upon an enemy encampment where Iwa-Nin attacked him. Koshiro was fighting for his life, easily and indifferently cutting through enemy Shinobi with precision when there was a small break in the enemy's onslaught. He looked around, making sure that there was no-one left. The bodies of his enemies laid around him, and Koshiro was getting ready to burn them when one of the bodies jerked and a small boy leapt out from underneath. Koshiro was so startled at the boy's sudden appearance he didn't notice the Iwa hitai-ate at first or the kunai in the boy's hand.

"Ahhhh!" the boy screamed out in fury – or maybe it was an attempt to sound braver and stronger than he was – but Koshiro caught the glint

of the kunai and acted quickly and instinctively. He spun and sliced with his blade, and the boy fell, cleanly bisected at the neck and the waist. Slowly, Koshiro turned to look at the boy. His head had twisted around to face upwards, a look of fear and shock frozen on his face... Koshiro's breath hitched.

This boy...he looked to be around Kakashi's age. He was so young; *too* young. Something stirred in Koshiro's stomach, and he felt the sudden urge to empty it of its contents. Koshiro went on to complete the mission, because that was his duty, but when night came, the nightmares started. The boy was no longer an Iwa-Nin *child*, but was now Kakashi, looking up at him with that blank, fear-filled look.

"*I wanna go home.*" Kakashi would whine, as blood pooled out of his mouth and tears poured out of his eyes.

The nightmares only got worse, as now both Kakashi and the boy would look at him, asking why he killed them. There was blood on Koshiro's hands, and he couldn't get it off. His blade had killed a child – granted, that child had tried to kill him, and it was self-defense, but it was a child none-the-less.

Koshiro couldn't breathe. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. Everything around him was drowned out when people tried talking to him. He couldn't even stomach the idea of going out on another mission. There was blood on his hands, and he couldn't get it off. Koshiro couldn't even pick up his sword. He could hardly keep food down. Every time he closed his eyes, he could see Kakashi; lying there, blood pooling out onto the ground.

Sometimes, if he was trapped in the dream long enough, Kakashi would ask in a gasping voice, "*Why did you kill me?*"

He couldn't take it anymore. Koshiro put down his sword. He had wrapped it up in a silk cloth and stuffed it into a box and had then proceeded to shove that box somewhere in his house where it could collect dust for all he cared.

His opponents were supposed to be experienced Shinobi; people who he had to actually put in *some* effort not to die against. Not *children*. Not children who *weren't even ten yet*.

Koshiro hadn't cried when his parents died. Yes, their deaths had saddened him, but they had lived full lives. He had killed someone's *child*; a *baby*. Would they even be proud of what he's done?

Koshiro broke down and cried for the first time in his life in front of Sakumo, and all Sakumo did was place his hand on Koshiro's shoulder and say,

"I understand."

Koshiro then requested to be given what pretty much amounted to a desk job. He was still willing to work for the Hokage, but not out on the field. He just couldn't do it anymore.

Koshiro ignored the whispers of people calling him 'weak' and 'pathetic'. Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. But he knew that those people who said those things were either civilians or Shinobi who didn't understand his reasoning. Maybe they didn't have children in their lives. Perhaps they were just cruel and didn't care about who they were killing. Maybe they didn't know the whole story, but Koshiro didn't want to take the time to justify himself to them. Some of them though, remained silent because they knew that feeling as well; but they could deal with it better than he could.

Koshiro knew that he'd be nothing but a hindrance if he were out in the field. So he spent most of his time in the filing room, often reading about the various Clans around the Elemental Nations. Because there was so much history and sometimes even mystery surrounding them, his interests usually were geared towards the extinct Clans.

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One day, Koshiro saw Sakumo return to the village, Koshiro smiled at him, but immediately noticed something was wrong. Sakumo didn't give all the details, but simply said,

"We failed a vital mission because of me...I...I went back for my teammates...they were going to be killed. We would have succeeded if I had just gone ahead, but...I-I couldn't leave them."

Koshiro frowned at first, because he wasn't sure exactly what the problem was. Shinobi teams had failed vital missions before in the past, but they had always managed to pick themselves up again and recover. The village may have relied on compensation from missions, but they relied on each other too.

Koshiro then remembered: it had been a mission personally requested by the Fire Daimyo himself. He remembered having to briefly go over the mission details with Sakumo's team, and now...there could be some potential political and financial blowback from this. The Hokage

would more than likely have to go to the Daimyo and tell him why they failed and apologize profusely – or maybe the Daimyo would come here himself, on the Hokage's home turf, which could truly be humiliating in some regard.

Depending on how things went, this could potentially be seen as treason.

But Sakumo's teammates – they had families; young ones at that. They could see their children grow, and their children would have a mother and a father, if just for a bit longer.

"You did the right thing." Because Koshiro truly believed that he did.

"Things will be fine." Because Koshiro wanted to believe it.

Sakumo looked at Koshiro in a way that truly showed defeat. *"They don't see it like that."*

A few days later, Koshiro heard the news of what Sakumo had done. Koshiro was beyond furious. He was angry at Sakumo's so-called teammates. He blamed them for Sakumo's death.

"You get to return to your families! You get to see your children!" One of the Uchiha was holding Koshiro back, trying to get the man to calm down as he pointed an accusing finger at them, or at least, fight them with his bare hands. *"Sakumo risked everything for you!"*

"Then Sakumo was a fool."

Koshiro froze, and the Uchiha's grip loosened, as he also stared at Sakumo's former teammates. He looked conflicted, as his dark eyes flashed from Koshiro to the other two.

"Where's the honor in our living? He should have just let us die."

Koshiro glared down at the ground, the light tinting his glasses. *"Then...would you have let Sakumo die?"*

"If it meant completing such a vital mission, then yes. The mission must come first, and must be completed at all costs."

Koshiro was disgusted. He was eerily calm as he spoke, sending shivers up the spines of the people who heard him. *"You two never deserved Sakumo as a teammate. He wasted his life for two of the most pathetic excuses for Human beings. You're right: Sakumo should have let*

you die. But even then, he wouldn't have. He was more of a Shinobi in his little pinky finger than you two combined ten times over."

He tried to talk to Kakashi, to see how the boy was doing, he had seen how Kakashi had closed himself off following Sakumo's death. The boy had been pushing himself to train, go on missions, and avoid the adults in the village.

"Kakashi-kun...I'm so sorry..."

Koshiro could see the look of pain and anger in Kakashi's eyes.

"What?"

Koshiro was angry and in pain, too. And he truly believed what he was about to say: *"Sakumo was right."*

But something flashed in Kakashi's eyes, and he simply replied, *"My father was a fool."*

Koshiro shook his head. He wanted to be positive for the grieving boy. He wanted Kakashi to see that someone, even if it was just *one* person, truly believed in what Sakumo had chosen to do. He had chosen Human lives; *people* over everything else. Sakumo may have said that Shinobi had no honor, but Sakumo's actions made that hard to believe. Maybe it all depended on a Shinobi's *Nindo*, the way they chose to live their life; but someone who chose to make sure that everyone came back *alive* from a mission even if they failed, *that* was someone who was needed on a team.

"No, you're wrong, Kakashi-kun. Sakumo was right, in what he did. Those people are still alive, thanks to him—"

"Well, he's dead now, so what does it matter?"

"Kakashi-kun, your father—"

"What do you know, Koshiro-san? You don't know anything! My father sacrificed everything for them, and for what?! They all turned on him! They were right about him, and they were right about you, too. You're weak; you can't even handle killing a child. It is the reality of people who choose to become Shinobi. If you couldn't handle a job as simple as that, then you never should have become a Shinobi in the first place!"

Koshiro didn't blame Kakashi for how he had lashed out. He blamed the village. He looked at the boy who had lost his father; who was

hearing everything that those people were saying, and he likely didn't know what to feel or what to think. Koshiro let Kakashi run away, and he probably shouldn't have. Maybe he could talk to Kakashi later. But the next day, Koshiro saw that Kakashi was being sent on a dangerous mission.

"I don't think sending Kakashi-kun on this mission is a good idea." Koshiro had told Hiruzen, but the Hokage just shook his head.

"This has been personally requested by Danzo and one of the local lords. Kakashi will be fine...he's a talented Shinobi." At least the Hokage had the decency to not really look as if he believed his own words.

"He's also a child who just lost his father!" Koshiro didn't mean to yell, but he didn't regret it. *"He needs time to mourn, to at least figure out this whole situation with Sa-his father. He needs to talk to someone, or at least have someone listen."*

"It's too late to try and reorganize anything now, Koshiro-san." Hiruzen replied. *"Kakashi-kun will be leaving with a team early tomorrow morning."*

"But...he doesn't need to be sent on a mission! He's just a child! Kakashi-kun needs time to be a child!"

Hiruzen sighed heavily, massaging the bridge of his nose. *"Look, Koshiro-san, I understand how you feel, hell, I hate it too. I know that you considered Sakumo-san to be like a brother to you, and you have made your feelings regarding Kakashi-kun and the situation with Sakumo-san abundantly clear. But Kakashi-kun by Shinobi standards is an adult; as Shinobi, we have to do—"*

One of the most disrespectful things Koshiro had ever done in his life was walk out while the Hokage was speaking. Koshiro was disgusted with the people here, he was frustrated with how things were ran, and most of all; he was *exhausted*. What he was about to do was one of the most impulsive things he had ever done in his life.

Koshiro went home, and packed all of his things that he could possibly need. He packed all of his clothing, Shinobi gear and made sure to grab the few pictures he had of his friends and family, Sealing all of it into various scrolls. It was painful to look at the pictures, but they were precious to him. Koshiro emptied his house of everything except for the furniture and the stuff in the kitchen. If someone new were to move in now, all they'd need to do was bring whatever they already owned and buy some food.

Koshiro then made his way to a remote area of Konoha and Summoned Gamakuro specifically.

"Oh, hi!" Gamakuro said excitedly. The Toad quickly realized that something was wrong. *"Koshiro-san...what...what's going on?"*

"Gamakuro...I want you to take me to your beach. I need you to take me to an island that's...out there."

"Okay..." Gamakuro said slowly. *"And do you intend to return or...?"*

Koshiro clenched his fist. *"As far as I'm concerned, I'm no longer a Shinobi of Konoha. I no longer want anything to do with it. I know that this is considered treason, Gamakuro, but trust me when I say that I won't reveal Konoha's secrets to anyone. I won't Summon you or any of the Toads after this. I'll even revoke the Toad's Contract. I'm just done with it all."*

"I'll do it..." Gamakuro said quietly, not looking happy about going along with the decision.

"Thank you."

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Gamakuro returned to the Toad's Realm with Koshiro hidden in his mouth, so that no-one would see him and know he was ever there. He quickly made his way towards an overgrown area of the Toad's Realm. Trees and numerous plants had simply been allowed to grow; and weren't ever trimmed back like the pride-filled Toads usually would.

This trek involved climbing over and around thick trees and roots, before coming to a small beach. Gamakuro then dived into the water, having to go around more roots. The roots were soon replaced by odd pillars made out of a sort of stone, covered in numerous Seals that had been broken long ago. He swam several hundred feet down to an archway that had '**Wano Gate**' written on it, and the Toad had no idea what that meant. The Gate had been sealed shut from a landslide long ago. He had to swim for several more feet before coming to a rock wall, and then swimming downwards through a tunnel of vines and roots, and other sea foliage.

Finally, Gamakuro came upon a dark cave that had '**East Blue**' written in faded letters over the top. Going through the cave was slightly disorienting at times, but it only made Gamakuro feel as if he had spun in a circle for too long. Finally, Gamakuro emerged from a small

pool that had been bigger at one point; but had been mostly filled up from fallen rocks and roots, coming out on a small island that was surrounded by a light fog.

There were numerous Seals covering this place as well, and Gamakuro let Koshiro out of his mouth. Koshiro instantly felt light-headed, and he fell to the ground. He was aware of where he was, but Koshiro couldn't focus on anything.

"Ah...*Koshiro-san!*" Gamakuro realized that Koshiro, who had a faraway look in his eyes was starting to wander off to an area of the island that had a large drop-off.

The Toad pulled Koshiro onto his back, and began swimming away from the island, intending to head for the small beach that usually had various things washed up on it.

"Wait..." Koshiro said, after regaining his senses. He wondered what was going on, as he quickly took in the sight of everything around the island. He couldn't focus on the island itself, but he studied the general location out of habit. Even then, he found it difficult to remember various details about the location itself.

From his position on Gamakuro's back, Koshiro started to wonder if he had been too impulsive and had done the right thing. But when he started thinking of the boy he had killed and how people had reacted; about Sakumo and Kakashi... Kakashi was probably the only one he was going to miss, and yet...the boy was too far gone; sucked into the hypocrisy and cruelty of that world. Koshiro almost considered turning back, but... he had come too far.

"Gamakuro...please take me to an island with people, and I'll go from there."

Gamakuro chose an island at random, and making sure to stay hidden from the view of the locals, Koshiro gave Gamakuro a bow. *"Thank you, for doing this, Gamakuro."*

The Toad just nodded, looking sad. He enjoyed his time with Koshiro.

"I'm revoking the Contract now," Koshiro bit his finger and Gamakuro took Koshiro's hand and pushed a flow of chakra into it. A numb feeling up to his shoulder made Koshiro's arm throb. *"Goodbye, Gamakuro."*

"Thank you, Koshiro-san...I had fun..."

Koshiro watched as the Toad swam away, and then he turned around and headed into the small town. He found that all he had to do was claim being shipwrecked for people to not question where he had come from. He stayed there for a while to learn about the world, and how to read its odd writing before he was on his way again.

Koshiro kept on moving – maybe he was still running, he wasn't sure. But one day, many years later, Koshiro met a woman named Yumie on an island called Shimitsuki and settled down. Ironically (or at least Koshiro found it to be so) her father, Kumojiro, ran a dojo, and the man's Kenjutsu was unlike anything Koshiro had ever seen before.

There was nothing but raw strength and a mysterious energy behind his swordsmanship that resulted in what Koshiro could only describe as "phantoms" of animals. One of the more impressive of these phantoms was a seahorse that appeared during one of Kumojiro's favorite techniques.

One day, Koshiro was talking with Kumojiro.

"I wanted to pass on my style to future generations, but all of 'em so far," the man shook his head in disappointment. "None of 'em have had the proper resolve for it. They just want power or toys; they've no interest in being proper Swordsmen."

Koshiro answered carefully. *"Well, it is an extremely difficult style...I mean, the endurance it would take someone..."*

His father-in-law wagged a finger at him. *"No, it's not about difficulty or endurance, Koshiro. It's not the techniques themselves, either. It's the Spirit of the Sword itself. It is merely a mighty springboard for greater things."*

In response to Koshiro's mildly perplexed expression, Kumojiro chuckled. *"You see, each sword has a Spirit of some kind. Some are more active than others – those are usually the more dangerous ones; some are dormant but only awaken upon reaching the right person to wield them."* He held up Wado Ichimonji, the sword that had been in the family for several generations, smiling in a way that showed bittersweet nostalgia. *"This sword is a special one, Koshiro. It's an exceptional sword. I may not be alive to see Sword's Spirit reach the end of the world and back, but...my spirit will be there for the ride."*

Koshiro didn't really understand, if he were being honest. As if he were completely aware of this fact, Kumojiro continued. *"When I saw what you were capable of with your blade, I must say that I have never*

seen one with such skill as yours." Kumojiro looked at him with a certain sadness that made the younger man uncomfortable. *"Those who took Sword's Spirit beyond this dojo thought that because they had mastered the techniques meant they could never lose. Perhaps it was something else entirely. But the point being, when they reached a mountain they couldn't cut, they let their Swordsman's spirit die. That's what truly killed them. They failed to realize that not all mountains need to be cut; they simply need to be traversed."*

There were stories of the Swordsmen who came out of this dojo who reached a point on the Grand Line before dying. Some lasted longer than others for various reasons, but all of them had gone to their graves. The stories that had reached them sometimes involved a man named 'Mihawk', who was terrifying in his own right. There were claims that he was the greatest Swordsman in the world, and Koshiro couldn't help but wonder how he'd compare to the Kenjutsu users of Kiri.

The older man nodded firmly, as if his speech had made sense. *"You let your spirit die as well, Koshiro."*

Koshiro unwittingly flinched, as if he had been stabbed. He looked at Kumojiro, that suspicious Shinobi part of him wondering if he *knew* something, although it was impossible.

Kumojiro looked at him with a sad expression. *"Unlike them, your physical body was not beaten down. I won't ask you what broke your spirit, but it is a great loss. That's the thing about Swordsmen, you know. We always reach a mountain that we must cut. But when the time comes, we can't always cut it the first time around. It all depends on if you're willing to get up to let yourself risk being the one who is cut. But for many; they can only see the difficult path ahead, and not the goal."*

Regret showed in his features as he stared at the sky. *"They lose themselves to that seemingly immovable mountain; and let themselves break under its weight."*

Koshiro thought that he understood what Kumojiro was saying. He silently wondered what had been his mountain. Had it been that child whose blood was seemingly still on his hands? Had it been the loss of Sakumo? Had it been not being able to convince Kakashi about Sakumo?

He had broken under the weight of many things. His body was alive; but his spirit was adrift. When the day came that Kumojiro would

breathe his last, he simply smiled at Koshiro in a way that suggested he knew more than he let on.

"Pass on the Sword's Spirit, Koshiro. I leave Wado Ichimonji in your care. I trust you'll find the right carrier for it."

Koshiro promised, of course.

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Koshiro was proud when his daughter was born, and heartbroken that Yumie didn't survive the labor. She only lived for a few days afterwards, but at least she was able to hold her daughter. He promised Yumie that he would look after their daughter. Kuina easily wielded Wado Ichimonji as if it were an extension of her. Koshiro was scared because Kuina was too much like him.

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Koshiro never thought that he would ever have anything to do with the Elemental Nations again, until a boy named Roronoa Zoro showed up at his dojo.

Kumojiro would have been ecstatic and proud, because someone had come along who would do everything he could to become the strongest Swordsman in the world. And the fact that he uses *three* swords instead of one would have made Kumojiro laugh outright. He could easily hear the man laughing as he said, *"That boy's got a true Swordsman's spirit!"*

He didn't know why, but Koshiro truly believed that Zoro could do it.

Chapter End Notes

Koshiro's had a sad life. I've added quite a bit to his character than there is (so far) in canon. I'm wondering if we're going to get more about him, mostly because we know that he at least has ties with the Revolutionaries. Or, that could simply be one of those OP things that shows the characters that unexpectedly have connections.

I have another flashback with Koshiro and Zoro coming in a few chapters, so please look forward to that.

In Which Roronoa Zoro wonders why those Two Brats are looking at him with Expressions Like that on their Faces and he Realizes he has Very Unwittingly Found himself a Family

Chapter Summary

All Zoro was supposed to do was look after these two kids; he didn't expect to get so attached to them. Truly, life takes an unexpected turn or two.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your kind comments and kudos. This chapter is actually going to cover the next few years, ending right around Shells Town, since that's where the next chapter will start.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Getting through the other side of the Barrier had been easy enough, and now, Zoro was rowing the little boat out from between two stone spires that were covered in hundreds of Seals. Looking at them made the boys' eyes feel strange, so they focused on the scene ahead of them. There was a pole with a tattered, faded flag that held no hint as to what the color used to be. Naruto and Gaara both stared out at the ocean, truly fascinated. Somehow, the ocean seemed so big compared to the one they had seen before. It looked endless, and the sky – it was so big and so open, and the clouds!

They looked so fluffy and so much bigger than the ones back home. But maybe that was just excitement fueling their imaginations.

Naruto's smile matched the sun as he stood up and leaned forward, gripping the edge of the boat tightly. "This is so *cool*, Dattebayo!"

"Brat, don't do that, you'll fall in!" Zoro shouted at Naruto, who was leaning precariously over the side.

Gaara groaned as the boat rocked, the feeling of his breakfast wanting to make another appearance burned in his throat. While he could appreciate the beauty of the ocean around them, he hoped that they would be on dry land again very soon.

"Here, you two," Zoro handed both boys an oar. "Start rowing – at the same time. Otherwise we'll go in a circle."

"Why?" Gaara asked, as he began to row.

"For one, its good training. Another; that stupid Gate is distracting." Zoro indicated it over his shoulder. "I feel this weird need to go towards it..."

It was pretty much like a moth to a flame. He had a natural instinct to head towards the thing. Probably if he could do that stupid chakra pulse thing he could push away from the Gate. As they rowed further away, Zoro slowly stopped feeling that pull, and finally relaxed.

"So...where're we headed?" Naruto asked when they stopped briefly for a break.

"Eh..." Zoro looked around. "I wanna get to the Grand Line..." Zoro trailed off, thinking that he would be prepared soon enough. "That man is waiting there..." Zoro glanced down at the two boys. "But before we do, you two are gonna have to get stronger. I'll have to learn more of those Jutsu..." Zoro finally removed the hitai-ate and looked at it thoughtfully. "I wonder if I could improvise..."

"Who's waiting at that Grand Line place?" Gaara asked.

"A man called Dracule *"Hawk Eyes"* Mihawk." Zoro replied with a smirk. "The greatest Swordsman in the world. And I intend to dethrone him."

Both boys were looking at Zoro in awe, although they had to admit that Mihawk's name sounded funny.

"You're *so cool*, 'ttebayo!"

"That's *amazing*, Zoro-nii!"

Zoro blinked and stared at the pair for a few seconds before muttering under his breath, "Yeah, whatever, you brats."

Zoro silently hoped he'd get used to those expressions eventually.

"So, before heading to the Grand Line, where will we go first?"

"We'll head up that way." Zoro offhandedly replied. "Go wherever the tide take us, hope for the best and all."

Naruto narrowed his eyes. "You have no idea where to go, do you?"

Gaara frowned. "I don't know how to navigate the ocean..." he felt slightly queasy again staring at the water, so he turned to Naruto to distract himself. "Do you, Naruto?"

"Ehhhh..." Naruto blinked and said, "Well...the sun's over there, and we're floating this way...so um, east?" At least he thought so. It helped having scenery that had shadows. "We aren't gonna get lost, are we, 'ttebayo?"

"I don't get lost." Zoro muttered from his spot. "We'll have to get some supplies at the next island. I still have a few hundred bellies left from before I came to the Elemental Nations. But we'll have to get more, considering there's three of us."

"...we're going to die." Gaara muttered. "People will find our corpses adrift at sea."

Naruto easily imagined some ship coming upon their small boat with all of their skeletons sitting inside and shivered.

"That's not gonna happen, right, Zoro-nii?" Naruto asked worriedly.

"Not unless we find an island." Zoro replied, not comforting the boy.

Naruto hoped they would find an island soon.

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Since there wasn't much to do while waiting for an island to appear, Zoro decided to start training the boys how to use basic Fuuinjutsu. Of course, all he knew was weight and strength repressing Seals, along with how to Seal away items and dead bodies.

"Alright, listen, you brats." Zoro explained, "The thing about Seals is that they're delicate. When writing 'em down, you've gotta have your handwriting exact, otherwise the Seal could backfire and cause you to lose a limb," Naruto winced at the idea, and Gaara blinked.

"Fortunately, the Seals I'll be showing you won't do that."

Naruto grumbled, "Couldn't you have left that part out? Dumbass, 'ttebayo..."

Zoro either didn't hear or completely ignored Naruto's comment. Pulling a scroll out of his bag, Zoro said, "If you two wanna to learn

Sealing, I suggest getting your handwriting down first, then we'll look at how Seals work."

Naruto grumbled again about studying, but since there wasn't anything else to do except stare out at the ocean or sleep, Naruto decided to practice his handwriting.

A few days later at some island, Naruto and Gaara were both studying how a Sealing scroll for items was written out.

Practicing with Sealing small rocks into a scroll, Gaara ended up not putting enough chakra into the Seal, so the rocks – while they had been pulled into the Seal, were sticking out at odd angles.

"You're not putting enough chakra in the Seal, sand-brat." Zoro supplied from his spot a few feet from the two boys. He took a sip of some cheap booze he had gotten at the local tavern. "Focus again. This time, pretend you're controlling your sand, like a small section of it. Sort of like you're spreading out a thin layer."

For Naruto, he was successful with Sealing the rocks, but the problem came when the rocks had retained their weight when they had been Sealed within the scroll.

"You forgot to write something down, brat." Zoro yawned as he laid back. "Look at the scroll I gave you and compare it to what you've written."

Naruto double-checked the scrolls, and he went, "Oh!" and quickly filled in a few characters where he had forgotten to add something about carrying weight and making it lighter. After that minor adjustment, Naruto was rapidly making strides in learning how to Seal. It was freakishly as if he were a natural at it. In just a few hours, Naruto has already mastered quite a few storage techniques, just from reading a book that Kakashi had given Zoro at some point.

Naruto then began trying to Seal stuff into his clothing so that he could have access to items such as weapons – or maybe something for a prank. It was an aspect of his repertoire that will take some work, but he didn't mind at all.

Within his mindscape though, Kyuubi can't help but sigh in mild irritation. *Of course* the kid would take after his father and Uzumaki lineage.

It was weird, and it was different, but it was nice. Naruto stood at the counter where he purchased a variety of food, and the storekeeper simply rung up his things without overcharging him or denying him a sale, or even demand that he buy something rotten, only to overcharge him for that, too.

Back in Konoha, no-one wanted him in their stores; and if he was successful in buying something, they always made him pay more than everyone else. In other parts of the Elemental Nations, Naruto had been treated with suspicion, but not the hostility. Here, he was just another face in the crowd – he was a kid, and the people treated him like it.

It was his first experience of boring normalcy. And it was elating.

Silently, as he ate lunch with his brothers, Naruto contemplated what he would do when he went back to Konoha and tried to purchase something from one of those stores. Would they still treat him like that? He'd probably be an awesome Ninja by then, and they would have no choice but to respect him! Naruto giggled to himself, as he thought of a prank he had pulled on a store owner one time. He'd probably be able to do something more elaborate if something like that ever happened again.

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One evening, Naruto pulled out the book, *The Tale of the Gutsy Shinobi*, and sort of shoved it into the teen's face.

"Zoro-nii, will you read to us?"

Zoro took the book and scowled, and felt whatever resolve he had crumbling at the sight of two sets of eyes looking at him hopefully. "Fine, but don't expect me to do any weird voices."

Both boys snuggled on either side of Zoro, not caring that there weren't any pictures to be seen.

The main character's name was Naruto, funnily enough.

Both boys were entranced by the story; a tale of a Ninja named Naruto, who vows to break the cycle of war plaguing the Ninja world.

"That's so cool...!" Naruto said with a happy sigh as he yawned. "I like that dream..."

Gaara was asleep, drooling on Zoro's shirt.

In Zoro's opinion, the book was sappy and slightly unrealistic at parts. It was still entertaining to read, though. In truth, it showed how limited the knowledge was of someone who lived in the Elemental Nations – not that it was Jiraiya's fault. There was always a war being fought somewhere, in some other far-off country, something that Koshiro had never liked.

But it was an admirable goal – sort of like those Kiri-Nin who wanted to stop war from plaguing their country. He wondered if they had been successful. Stuffing the book into the pocket of Naruto's bag, Zoro settled down to sleep.

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Within Gaara's Mindscape:

Gaara sat silently in front of a screaming and cursing Ichibi, until finally, upon not eliciting any sort of reaction, Ichibi quieted down to stare scathingly at Gaara.

"Are you about done?" Gaara asked with a disinterested gaze that very nearly matched Zoro's.

That set off Ichibi again.

"YOU FUCKING BRAT! YOU *DARE* TO TALK TO ME LIKE THAT?! I'LL RIP YOU TO SHREDS AND SHOVE THE REMAINS UP YOUR ASS!"

Gaara stayed silent for a few minutes longer, before responding, "I'm not going to put you in the sphere today," Ichibi rolled his eyes, "on the condition you don't scream and shout in my head. Any screaming, shouting, or insults, and I'll lock you away for a month."

"It's already been a fucking month."

"Then I'll make it two."

Ichibi glared, and Gaara blinked.

"Anyway, our travels have been kind of boring," Gaara started talking. "Zoro-nii has been training Naruto and me in a lot..."

"I don't fucking care."

"...and I'm learning how to manipulate my sand better. I like carving, that's fun. I've started making Ninja weapons for Naruto, but I'm not very good, yet."

"You can lock me away now..."

"I like manipulating the grains of sand to make patterns in our boat, that's fun."

"You're doing this on purpose, aren't you, you fucking bastard?"

"I wish you would tell me some of your hobbies, so I'm not the only one talking. But since you won't talk to me; it's really like a giant Sea King ate your tongue out of your head. Speaking of tongues, I like eating grilled tongue a lot."

"STOP IT!...Please?"

"I also like gizzards..."

This was torture! Cruel and unusual punishment! Ichibi was becoming increasingly annoyed, and Gaara ignored his shouts for a while before giving him a pitying glance.

"You aren't a very good conversationalist. Why can't you be more like Kyuubi?"

It was as if steam shot out of Ichibi's ears. **"HOW DARE YOU COMPARE ME TO THAT FUCKING STUPID FOX?! I'M NOTHING LIKE MY STUPID BROTHER!"**

Gaara blinked and went wide-eyed. "You and Kyuubi are *brothers*?"

Ichibi froze, and mentally cursed at unintentionally revealing personal information that was quite frankly, none of anyone's business. The real question was *why* he had revealed it in the first place. Something about his container had influenced him into revealing that information, thanks to the frustrating impassiveness that Gaara was giving him, along with completely ignoring him.

"You talked about yourself!" Gaara was ecstatic. "I'll see you later!"

With that, Gaara disappeared, leaving Ichibi not locked up in a water sphere. That little... Ichibi slammed a fist against a pole, rattling his chains. For now, Ichibi chose to sulk in his loss, and not take for granted that Gaara didn't put him to sleep this time.

Within Naruto's Mindscape:

If there was one thing Naruto could do well, that was ramble. He could ramble off about many things, somehow get sidetracked and ramble about that, too. After exhausting whatever topic it was that sidetracked him, Naruto would mutter, "Now, where was I...? Oh, right!" and then he'd get back to whatever it was he was originally talking about.

Kyuubi sighed, heavily.

Naruto continued talking. "Did ya know? Gaara's making me Ninja weapons now... kunai, shuriken, and stuff like that! I've had to improvise Ninja wire with fishing line, and that's okay, 'ttebayou..." Naruto grinned, happily. "I'm used to improvising, ya know. Not many people wanted to sell me stuff because of you, but that's okay, I don't blame you. They were being stupid, 'sides, it's made me vers... versatill? Versatile, 'ttebayou."

Naruto sat on his rock and swung his legs, lightly splashing the water with the tips of his toes.

"The only things I can't really get my hands on is the right kinda paper for Sealing stuff – it has to be a certain, sturdy material, but Zoro-nii told me I can use my arms and legs once I'm good enough to not like, tear stuff up. I could lose a limb, not that I want that, 'ttebayou."

Sighing, Naruto continued, "I'm learning stuff from some of the scrolls that the old man left with us, and even Dog-chan gave Zoro some stuff to use. I can't wait to see Dog-chan, again."

Kyuubi didn't bother to respond, and simply let Naruto talk.

"I also can't wait for you to tell me your name, I bet it's awesome. Once I'm an amazing Ninja, you'll tell me, right?"

Kyuubi just rolled his eyes, letting his irritation be known, but of course it went ignored.

Naruto was silent for a moment, and Kyuubi wondered if graciously if the kid had finally run out of material. But then...

"Hey, Kyuubi? What were Zoro-nii's relatives like?"

Kyuubi blinked, because that was such an out-of-the-blue question.

"...Why do you want to know?"

Naruto shrugged. "I think it would be nice, ya know? If I had someone who knew about my family, I'd want 'em to tell me..."

Sighing, Kyuubi said, **"Look, it's been a long time since I've seen a Kūhaku. I've never had a reason to even think about them, at least not until a few months ago. Even then..."**

"But you know *something*, right?"

"Nothing worth mentioning."

Naruto scowled and huffed, crossing his arms.

"If I tell you something about them, will you leave me alone?"

The blond looked up at the Fox expectantly.

Honestly, the memories he had of them were vague, but the bits and pieces that came through left things to interpretation. From what he could gather, Kyuubi said,

"Ryuuma was a stubborn idiot; clearly, those genes were strong enough that Roronoa inherited that aspect of him. He claimed to have slain a dragon. Ikue was... she was stubborn too. Could be a bit intense if it was something she was passionate about."

"Oh..." Naruto looked slightly disappointed. "I wish there was more... they sound like they were pretty awesome."

"It's what you're gonna get."

"Do you miss them?"

Kyuubi stared at the boy, and something uncomfortable stirred in his gut. **"I have no reason to form attachments with Humans – you are born and then you die; from dust you came, and to dust you will return. Your lives mean nothing in the grand scheme of things; like a pebble's ripple in this ocean."**

"Oh. Okay... I guess... I guess I'll go, now. Later, Kyuubi."

Naruto disappeared, and Kyuubi sighed, yet again. The holes in his memories hadn't really bothered him so much, before. But now that he was reminded of those memories and could dwell on them... it was bothersome.

Outside, Gaara nearly pounced on Naruto when he came out of his Dreamscape.

"Naruto! Guess what? Ichibi and Kyuubi are brothers!"

Naruto gasped, wide-eyed, before he grinned. "Know what this means, Gaara? We were practically brothers *before* we met, 'ttebayou!"

Gaara grinned, and covered his mouth, shyly. "I like that."

"Mm!" Naruto beamed.

00oo00

At an island in the East Blue, several weeks later:

Kefir Brutus was a large man that neared a good eight feet in height; was strong like an ox, and he was known around Vereen Island as *Big Ox*. He was a bandit that had tormented the locals of Vereen for a good three years. He had mastered hiding from the local authorities and the Marines within the island's thick forests and caves.

Kefir was proud of his *17,000,000* bounty, and often bragged about it quite loudly. The locals could only glance away and begrudgingly give him what he wanted. For anyone who disagreed with him, he would ram his fist into them, and toss them through walls.

He sauntered through the marketplace, and approached a stall where a woman was handing a blond kid some food. Before the kid could take it though, Kefir swiped it from the kid's outstretched hands.

"Ha, thanks, kid!"

"HEY!" the blond swiveled on his heel and growled,
"That's *mine*, Dattebayo!"

Kefir merely shoved the kid back by his head as he took a bite out of one of the sandwiches. "Well, it's mine, now. Fuck off, kid."

"My brother gave me money to buy us lunch!" the kid insisted. "So now, you gotta pay me back, 'ttebayou."

"I ain't gotta do nothin', kid." Kefir swallowed the rest of the sandwiches. "Do you know who I am? *Big Ox* Kefir! I have *17,000,000* berries on my head! That means I can do this-!" Kefir

grabbed the kid and threw him through a wall, and the various stall owners and villagers screamed and shouted. "And no-one can stop me!"

Kefir walked off, laughing, unaware of the calamity that was to befall him.

Naruto groaned as he pulled himself up, and out of the wreckage of the building.

"Oi, brat!" Zoro called. The teen was next to Naruto within seconds, having unwittingly used his Kekkei Genkai. Zoro was pulling a bit off wall out of the way. His voice sounded slightly concerned as he asked, "You alright?"

"Ow, ow..." Naruto climbed out of the building, rubbing his head. He then walked up to the teen. "He stole our lunch, Zoro-nii! He's braggin' all about how he has a bounty on his head, and he threw me into that wall, the jerk!"

Immediately alert, Zoro asked, "Who?"

"Big Ox Kefir," one of the villagers supplied, looking nervous. "He has a bounty of 17,000,000 belli on his head..."

"Does he now?" Zoro asked, silver eyes glinting to where Kefir had disappeared to. Kefir, who by now had wandered off, feeling that the stupid little kid wasn't worth his time. After all, what could that kid hope to accomplish?

After having thrown that stupid kid through the wall, Kefir took a few more things with little to no resistance from the villagers, and made his way to his hideout. He had just settled down to read his favorite magazine, when the wall to his hut exploded, and sand surrounded him. Kefir shouted and screamed, employing his strength – and he managed to break out of the sand.

A redhead that housed a glare within freaky raccoon-eyes that seemed to root Kefir on the spot, but...heh...that didn't make any sense! The kid was barely passed his knee, if that! His breaking free of the sand was clearly a surprise to the redhead, who appeared to be controlling the sand. His expression slowly went from shock to something else... Kefir actually shivered when a wide-eyed, maniacal grin made its way onto the kid's features.

"No-one's ever broken out of my sand like that before..." the kid said,

laughter laced into his words. "I think we're gonna have...*FUN!*"

For some reason, he wanted to put as much distance between him and that redhead. It wasn't like he was scared, or anything...

A wall of sand shot at him, and Kefir moved to dodge it, when suddenly out of nowhere, a green-haired teen appeared before him, wielding three swords. The teen performed a spinning motion that would have resulted in Kefir losing his arm; but only sliced off his fingers when he jumped backwards to avoid the attack. He landed roughly and rolled across the ground. The pain hadn't even registered thanks to a rush of adrenaline.

"So, you're a couple of wannabe bounty-!"

Kefir was cut off when someone shouted, "*Doton: Shinjū Zanshu no Jutsu!*"

Kefir had no idea what happened, but he was buried up to his neck in the earth, and he couldn't move. The earth several feet away from him rose up, and that blond kid from the market crawled out. "Awesome, I did it!"

"Hey!" Kefir shouted. "What is this?! Wait, maybe...let's strike up a deal!"

The teen glared at the man, and he quickly stopped talking.

"Does he need his body?" the redhead asked, and Kefir balked.

"Yes, I do!"

The redhead just blinked. "If you're dead, you don't."

"They'll probably take a few hundred away if he's dead," the teen replied, sheathing his swords.

That was when the blond kid walked up and kicked Kefir in the face – the blond was surprisingly strong – but it only resulted in a broken nose and a few missing teeth.

"Oh...he's not knocked out, 'ttebayou..."

"DON' KIGG ME, YOU LIDDLE BASDARD!"

The redhead looked down at him before speaking again, "He doesn't need his limbs."

The blond winced. "That seems a bit harsh, though."

"He threw you through a wall."

"But, still..."

"He also stole our food."

"Well...True."

Kefir hypocritically didn't think that those things were good enough reasons to mutilate someone. He began trying to wriggle free, but to no avail.

The teen sighed as he finally spoke up, reaching a compromise. "Sand-brat, just break his legs."

Kefir didn't like how the sand-kid looked at him just then.

Of all the sights the townsfolk of Vereen ever thought they'd see; seeing *Big Ox* Kefir Brutus with broken and twisted limbs tossed over the shoulder of a teen with two young boys following after him wasn't one of them.

They were extremely grateful of course, and a few townsfolk gave the trio food and clothing, and thanked the Bounty Hunters profusely.

Over time, people of course began talking about the odd trio of Bounty Hunters that aimlessly wandered the East Blue. The rumors about them were quite frightening, and no-one could say for sure whether or not the rumors were exaggerated. They sounded so outlandish, most anyone who heard them was sure that they were hearing mere stories told by bored islanders.

Phantom Blade Roronoa Zoro – a young man who had the uncanny ability to appear and disappear as he pleased, cutting through his enemies. People who witnessed it claimed that it seemed like he phased through his targets.

Mad Grin Gaara, who appeared to enjoy fighting a little too much, and carried around a large gourd of sand that seemed impossible for a boy his size to carry.

Naruto unfortunately, hadn't earned himself an epithet yet, much to his annoyance. People knew that he flawlessly switched between a short sword and an odd, chain-weapon that was like a small scythe.

He also had various abilities that many people could identify as being Ninja-like, but no-one had really come up with a name that stuck.

Particularly because in most people's minds, Ninja weren't supposed to be so loud, or flashy. Plus, Naruto didn't display the usual techniques that most of the residents of East Blue associated with Ninja. Besides, Naruto could claim to be a Ninja all he wanted, but the fact was, he didn't exactly *look* like the typical Ninja either.

Everyone thought that Ninja wore black, and Naruto was still wearing the blue samue and gray pants that Zoro had bought him months before.

"Don't worry, Naruto," Gaara said, comforting his brother where he could, "you'll get a name, too."

"You'll get a name, too..." Naruto mocked bitterly under his breath. "I already have some awesome ideas for names, but no-one wants to use 'em, 'ttebayou!"

God of Shinobi; Naruto the Ninja; Naruto the Super Awesome Ninja; among others that Naruto had tried to convince others to call him, simply had never stuck, and many people called Naruto 'cute' for 'playing' Ninja.

"Huh, maybe *Cute* will end up being in your epithet," Zoro teased, ruffling Naruto's hair. Naruto scowled and swatted Zoro's hand away before he pulled his legs up to his chest, and buried his face in his knees and groaned about the unfairness of it all.

00oo00

While many would think that sailing through the ocean on a small boat would be adventurous, peaceful, and romantic, such a thing could unfortunately also cause people to go stir crazy. That was the case in the early afternoon of that day. A shout cut through the calm:

"Cut it out, 'ttebayo!"

"I didn't do anything." Gaara replied, glaring slightly. "You're just upset that I was able to do it better than you."

Naruto pointed to the marble game that was set between them, and accused, "You *cheated!*"

"You can't prove I did. Perhaps you lost so many times in a row is

simply because you...what is the phrase? ...You suck."

"RRGGHHH!" Naruto clenched his fists. "You cheated because otherwise you couldn't win!"

"I followed the rules exactly as you said them! You're the one who kept changing them because they didn't suit you!" Gaara stood up, and even though he was shorter than Naruto, he had a large enough presence to cause the other boy to take a step back where he could. "Don't think I didn't notice the pattern of you suddenly "remembering a new rule" whenever I got a lead."

"But I've played this game *lots* of times, and *I'm* the one who had to tell you the rules! No way you could beat me, 'ttebayo!"

Just then, Gaara suddenly reached out and conked Naruto on the head. It wasn't hard enough to injure, but it did hurt; Gaara was surprisingly strong for a boy his age and size, thanks in part to carrying a large gourd and the Weight Seals that Zoro had put on him.

Naruto groaned as he rubbed his head and glared at Gaara. Because Gaara had his gourd over on the other side of the boat by a snoring Zoro, Naruto took a chance and tackled Gaara. The two boys shouted and cursed at each other, with Zoro snoring away none the wiser.

Zoro was jolted awake by the combined action of the boat rocking as if they were in the middle of a storm and the two boys landing on top of him.

At first, Zoro did in fact think that there was a storm, but then Naruto's foot connected with his jaw, while Gaara's foot connected with something delicate, and the color drained from Zoro's face. He moaned in pain as the two boys wrestled while hurling threats and obscenities.

Zoro growled in frustration, suddenly sympathizing with his sensei when he had to deal with numerous rowdy boys.

"That does it!" ignoring the painful throbbing that coursed through his jaw and his manhood, Zoro shakily stood up, and grabbed both boys by their collars. Both Naruto and Gaara suddenly felt an increased weight come over them, and Zoro dropped them to the bottom of the boat. Zoro growled out, "You dumbasses."

"I can't move!" Naruto whined.

"He started it." Gaara said.

"I don't give a damn who started what, you two are gonna stay there until you can either move on your own, or learn to get along." Zoro said with finality.

Both boys glared at Zoro, who was unfazed, and purposefully ignored each other.

True to his word, Zoro refused to let the heavier Seals off of them. But he kept an eye on the two as they forced themselves to stand mere hours later. He had only increased their weights by about fifteen pounds each, so they could still move easily enough once they got used to the increased weight.

Both Naruto and Gaara had seemingly forgotten their argument from earlier, and now were looking at Zoro and whispering and grinning. Zoro felt a cold sweat form, wondering what the two were conspiring. He didn't like the looks those two brats were giving him.

Over the next few days, whenever Zoro did anything, Naruto would giggle, and Gaara would smirk, and they'd whisper excitedly to each other, sending him odd glances as if something were about to happen. Zoro took to checking his food before eating, but never found anything, and neither of the two did anything like draw on his face. Zoro even checked all of his clothing – nothing... what were those two up to?!

Seeing Zoro grow increasingly paranoid over something that wasn't going to happen was vastly entertaining for Naruto and Gaara.

It wasn't so entertaining anymore when Zoro smirked at the two, and an ominous sensation hung over them. "If you two insist on playing games," he cracked his knuckles, "I'll more than happily oblige."

"We're sorry!" both boys said quickly.

Zoro smirked in satisfaction.

Normalcy had returned for the trio once again.

00oo00

There came a day when Gaara held up his sandals to Zoro, saying, "Zoro-nii, these are hurting my feet..."

Zoro frowned when he looked at the sandals, and he took one from Gaara. "It seems you've hit a growth spurt... we'll have to get you

shoes from the next island we go to." Handing the other sandal back to the boy, he said, "Just go barefoot for now."

The island they came to had a decent-enough town that there was a shop available where they could get everything they needed.

Gaara stared at the dark brown shoes on his feet – close-toed, and practical for someone who would be traveling – and he wondered if he would get used to wearing them.

"They feel weird."

Zoro scratched the back of his head and asked, "Weird how?"

"I feel like they're eating my feet. I liked my sandals."

Zoro sighed, and said, "Sand-brat, they don't have shoes like that here." Waving to the selection of shoes on the floor, "This is what they have. So, you'll either have to pick something from here, or go barefoot."

"Maybe we can get sandals some other time?" Naruto suggested hopefully.

Gaara sighed, pouting to some extent from not being able to get something like the sandals that were now a size too small for him.

"I don't like them. They squeeze my feet."

Zoro sighed again, and brusquely said, "It's either the shoes or you go barefoot."

Gaara pulled the shoes off and wiggled his toes. Well... he *did* have his second armor, and he could just add an extra layer of sand to the bottom of his feet if the lack of shoes were a problem.

"...I'll go barefoot."

Zoro just shrugged. "Alright, then."

In all honesty, Zoro probably shouldn't have been trusting a nine-year-old's reasoning for not wanting basic necessities, but he didn't see the harm in it. What was he going to do? *Force* the kid into buying shoes? Zoro wouldn't put it past Gaara to throw the shoes into the ocean and claim that a Sea King was trying to chew his legs off; and getting rid of the shoes was the only way to save himself and be rid of the creature.

Zoro could only sigh yet again in exasperation, when he realized he was starting to think up the altogether ridiculous and macabre tales Gaara liked to talk about at random without any help from the boy whatsoever.

"If we aren't buying anything, let's go."

For now, it appeared that Gaara was perfectly content going barefoot.

00oo00

There came a day when the trio came upon an island with a town called Termia that had a certain, mysterious air about it. Kyuubi and Ichibi both would describe it as being 'ancient'. The architecture of the town was made up of skillfully crafted stone and carved wood, with a large clock tower in the center of town. It was a peaceful town that obviously had little to no trouble from invaders.

Naruto and Gaara followed Zoro closely as they walked into a clothing store, because Zoro wanted to get another bandana. His reasoning for not keeping the Kiri hitai-ate was that it would bring about unnecessary attention to him. Plus, if they were to ever dispel that annoying barrier, and the Ninja decided to venture out, anything he did while wearing the hitai-ate would reflect on the actual Kiri-Nin. There were those idiots who had thought that he was from Kiri, when he so obviously wasn't, due to wearing that hitai-ate. If he were in the Kiri-Nin's position, he wouldn't have cared, but this was just to make any future Kiri-Nins' lives easier. Not like he had a sort-of respect for them or anything.

While Zoro hunted down the perfect bandana, Naruto came across a curious section in the store: it was entirely devoted to a golden fox with three tails. There were masks of various sizes and colors, along with clothing and toys.

The shopkeeper approached Naruto, putting on a naturally warm smile as she did so. "I see you've taken an interest in Keaton."

Naruto turned to the girl. "Keaton?"

"Mm-hmm!" she nodded happily, and held a finger erect. "Keaton is something of our local lore. He's a fine trickster! Legend has it that if you wear one of his masks in certain areas of our island, he'll appear and play games with you. If you win, he'll give you a prize!"

"Really?!" Naruto's eyes shined in excitement.

"Oh, yes," she spoke conspiratorially, "But he only appears at certain times of the day, and he only ever appears before children. It's considered very lucky if Keaton appears before you."

"So cool..." Naruto breathed, looking over the fox masks. He then glanced over to the wall, where there were hoodies of various colors and sizes; featuring fox ears on the hood. His gaze landed on one of the red hoodies. Kyuubi was more of a red-orange, but the hoodie was close enough. Naruto grabbed one of the red hoodies and ran over to where Zoro and Gaara were standing.

Holding up the hoodie, Naruto asked, "Zoro-nii, can I get this?"

Zoro glanced at the hoodie, then at the boy holding it, and felt whatever resolve he had at replying 'no' crumble. Besides, it wouldn't exactly be fair of him to buy a bandana and then turn around and deny Naruto a simple hoodie.

"Not that one. Get one that's a few sizes up."

"Thank you!"

Naruto went to grab the desired hoodie – a sleeveless red one because it looked cool – and held it close as he grinned at Zoro.

Gaara on the other hand, had been attracted to a large, dark-purple scarf that was extremely long. He had to wrap it around his neck numerous times in order to wear it. In all honesty, it looked as if he were drowning in the fabric as it settled around his shoulders, with it nearly covering the bottom-half of his face.

"Zoro-nii, can I get this?"

Zoro blinked at Gaara – dark gray shirt, burgundy pants, gourd, oversized purple scarf – and don't forget the kid still insisted on going everywhere barefoot – his fashion sense was likely nonexistent.

"...Are you sure you want that, sand-brat?"

"Yeah!"

Zoro complied. "Well, alright then."

Gaara beamed up at Zoro, and Zoro found himself feeling flustered. Whenever the boys looked at him with those expressions, a feeling like... happiness washed over him. He didn't really understand why,

but he wasn't going to complain. Zoro reached out and ruffled Gaara's hair, and Gaara let out a laugh.

Zoro was quick to notice that this time, Gaara didn't stop himself from laughing; nor did he cover his mouth and act shy upon making such a noise. Gaara joined Naruto, who was excited about his new hoodie, and Zoro just rolled his eyes good naturedly as the shopkeeper smiled at the younger two.

00oo00

Today was a special one – extra special in Naruto's opinion. They were currently on an island somewhere in East Blue – called Remini, if he remembered correctly. Naruto was thankful that they were on an island on this particular day.

Naruto grinned up at Zoro, his smile matching the sun. "Ne, Zoro-nii... know what today is, 'ttebayou?"

Zoro yawned, "What is it?"

"It's my birthday."

Zoro halted, and looked at Naruto, suddenly realizing that he didn't have anything to give to the kid... other than some belli.

"It's your birthday?" Gaara asked, also coming to the realization that he didn't have anything to give Naruto.

"Uh-huh." Naruto latched onto Zoro and said, "It's also been a year since we met, 'ttebayou."

"Has it?" Zoro muttered. He hadn't exactly bothered to keep track of time.

"Can I get my ear pierced?" Naruto asked, hopefully. "I wanna get earrings, kinda like you."

Zoro blinked, slowly comprehending the request and reason for it. Something like pride and flattery rose within him. Crossing his arms to be as nonchalant as possible, he replied,

"Yeah, if you want to, brat."

Naruto cheered, and then turned to Gaara. "Gaara! Can you make me a pair of earrings? Sort of like small loops. I want 'em to fit against my ear, like this."

Naruto excitedly described what he wanted; and Gaara smiled, glad that he could give Naruto something that he wanted.

Several hours later, the three found themselves outside of a tattoo and piercings shop. Naruto had a pair of bone-white earrings in hand.

The tattoo artist didn't even blink twice upon the request, which said a lot about what type of client came through her store. Naruto barely even winced as both earrings pierced the skin of his right earlobe.

She handed Naruto a small tub of salve. "Put that on your ear once a day for like, four weeks. Trust me, you don't want your ear getting infected."

Naruto nodded in thanks, and beamed up at Zoro. "Doesn't this make me look cool?"

...Zoro resisted the urge to tell the blond that he looked more 'cute' than cool, and simply smirked, a feeling like pride washed over him. "Yeah, like a real badass."

Gaara tilted his head. "...But nothing about you has changed?"

Naruto collapsed to the ground, and practically demanded, "What's that supposed to mean?!"

"You just have pierced ears now...does that somehow make you stronger?"

"It makes me look *awesome*, 'ttebayou!" Naruto insisted.

"That's debatable." Gaara said. "I think you should let your ear rot off – *that* would make you look badass. Think of how that would look – ear bloody and swollen, along with tiny flesh balloons that appear where the infection is."

Naruto shivered at the awful mental imagery that assaulted his brain. "*Why* do you *have* to say stuff like that, 'ttebayou?!"

Gaara laughed, which only seemed to irritate Naruto further. "You're always saying creepy stuff like that!"

"It's funny."

The two boys walked off, half-heartedly arguing with each other, and Zoro shook his head in exasperation as he paid the woman.

"Those two sound like a handful..."

Zoro didn't really know how to respond to that, so he just muttered 'thanks' paid the woman before joining Naruto and Gaara outside.

"Isn't this great?" Naruto was ecstatic. "Next month is Zoro-nii's birthday," he briefly pouted as he added, "he didn't bother telling me, so I couldn't get him anything."

"How old are you going to be, Zoro-nii?" Gaara asked.

"Eighteen."

Gaara looked up at him with wide, considering eyes. Yashamaru had told him once that eighteen was an important event for people for a variety of reasons.

Naruto was determined to do something for Zoro this time around.

But that left the question: what exactly *were* they going to do for Zoro's birthday?

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For Zoro, his birthday had never been that big a deal. It was just another day, in his opinion. But then, those two brats would have ran up to him if their boat hadn't hindered the action, with smiles on their faces and emanating excitement. "We got something for you, 'ttebayou!" Naruto said, grinning so wide, it was surprising his face didn't crack in half.

Gaara was smiling as well, though not nearly as exuberantly as Naruto. "We think you'll like it."

The boys had a few hundred belli between them, though they were limited in what they could buy. While most people probably would have gone for some kind of alcohol; that was something that Zoro got for himself all the time. This had to be something special.

Naruto held up a small box, "Happy birthday, Zoro-nii!"

Zoro decided he would just go along with it just to appease the two. They both seemed to shake in anticipation as he removed the lid to reveal... it was a dark green bandana, but it had golden-colored clouds and numerous red dragons on it. The pattern was intricate, and it was...

"Do you like it?" Gaara asked, though there was a tone in his voice that seemed to fear Zoro would reject the gift.

"...I like it." Zoro said, giving the boys a warm smile.

Both Gaara and Naruto were slightly taken aback, because this was the first time they had seen Zoro with such an expression. It only lasted for a few seconds, before Zoro took off the old bandana from his arm, and tied the new one there.

"It's perfect." Zoro ruffled both sets of hair. "Thanks."

000*000

Christmas was a holiday that was completely foreign to Gaara. It appeared to be something that was a big deal, according to Naruto. Zoro simply shrugged, not really caring either way, but he did have a small, rare smile on his face.

The island they were at looked festive; with people lighting intricate paper lanterns, hanging them in front of their homes. The trees were covered in colorful decorations, and people wore colorful clothing and some people wore garland as hats or necklaces.

"In Konoha, this was called 'The Festival of Lights'." Naruto said, but his smile didn't really look happy. "There was food and music, and people would line the streets with lanterns that would be lit on the 24th of December before midnight and stay lit all through Christmas Day. People would share presents and stuff."

Naruto wasn't exactly bitter about missing out, but the day didn't hold the best memories for him. Someone ruffled his hair, and Naruto glanced up at Zoro.

"I want booze. There's likely gonna be some snacks, so get what you want."

Naruto paused briefly, looking up at Zoro. The boy grinned as he grabbed Gaara's hand and then Zoro's. The bitter feeling slowly melted away into a peaceful and happy one. He finally had his family – and could make new memories.

0-0-0

Gaara was anticipating New Year's, because at least this was a holiday that he was familiar with. His uncle always gave him a present on this

day, and Gaara had given Yashamaru crudely made childish drawings and clay statues. Now, Gaara had Zoro and Naruto.

Eliciting Naruto's help with Zoro's gift, Gaara spent his sleepless nights using his sand to carve bits and pieces of the bone he had gotten from Kimimaro into a bracelet. Naruto carefully painted a number of the bone-beads black – using paint they had bought from a nearby store, and Gaara carved out two small pendants – one was a fox and the other a tanuki. They held it together using several strands of fishing wire, and it would certainly hold fast.

"Channel some of your chakra into it, Naruto." Gaara said, as he let some of his chakra flow into the bracelet. A small smile appeared on Gaara's face as he explained, "My uncle told me that when you give something personal like this to someone you love, you channel chakra into it for good luck, peace and safety...things like that."

Naruto grinned. "I like that. Konoha doesn't have anything like that."

Naruto channeled a bit of his chakra into the bracelet as well, and soon it was ready.

The two approached Zoro who was snoring away under a heavily decorated tree, and Naruto poked him. Zoro sat up so fast, he nearly head-butted Gaara, but the boy quickly took a step back.

"Is everything alright?" Zoro asked, looking bleary-eyed.

"Yeah!" Naruto said excitedly.

Gaara held out the bracelet. "Happy New Year's, Zoro-nii."

Zoro took it with a curious expression on his face. He looked at the two charms connected to the bracelet, and at first he honestly had a difficult time telling what they were. One was more monkey-like and the other looked like a cat. But upon closer inspection, he could see the resemblance to a tanuki and a fox. Zoro put on the bracelet – which fit perfectly – and no, Zoro wasn't feeling emotional.

He ruffled both boys' hair, and then reached into the bag he had and pulled out a pair of silver goggles and handed them to Gaara.

Gaara looked at the goggles wide-eyed. They were the ones he had been admiring at a store a week or so ago.

"I was gonna wait till your birthday to give these to you. Since we're

exchanging gifts now..." Zoro shrugged lazily. Turning to Naruto, "As for you, brat, I'm gonna show you a few new techniques. You've been training hard, so you're ready for the next step."

Naruto was so excited, he grabbed Zoro in a tight hug. Not to be left out, Gaara hugged Zoro as well. Zoro scowled and complained under his breath about 'overly affectionate brats' but made no move to push the boys off.

Gaara's voice was muffled from burying his face into Zoro's shirt as he quietly said, "I love you, Zoro-nii."

Zoro froze, and slowly glanced down at Gaara. He could only see the top of the boy's head, and was unable to read his expression. Not knowing what else he should do, Zoro simply ruffled Gaara's hair again and awkwardly responded, "Y-yeah...me too, sand-brat."

Zoro's face flushed though, when a few people who were walking by commented on how cute they were.

"Alright, you two, that's enough, you're suffocating me." Zoro said, finally pushing the two away. That was enough with all the feely emotional stuff for him.

Naruto's grin was brighter than all the lanterns, and Gaara slipped on the goggles so that they were around his neck, buried within the folds of his scarf, and a small, contented smile was on his face.

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None of them could say when or where it had happened, or who had even started calling them the name. There came a day when Zoro, Naruto, and Gaara came to an island with a few small towns scattered across it. While in one of these towns, an older woman holding a wanted poster in a tight grip approached them, exuding nervous tension.

When three pairs of eyes glanced up at her with curiosity, she swallowed her nerves and asked, "Excuse me, but are you the Roronoa Brothers?"

Both boys looked to Zoro, and the teen merely decided that instead of trying to needlessly explain that he was just watching out for them or something, and going into a complicated tale that was quite frankly no-one else's business; simply responded with,

"Yeah, that's us."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" the woman said relieved, and she held out the wanted poster to him. "There is a man who lives in a shack in the forest west of here..."

Whatever the woman was saying was lost on the boys, because they both were looking at Zoro in a different light. While they both thought of Zoro as an older brother, this was the first time Zoro had said anything about all of them being brothers; being a *family*. They were the Roronoa Brothers, and Gaara was coming to the realization that he now had a family name.

Naruto was sounding the name, 'Roronoa Naruto' out in his head. He liked how it sounded. While he definitely was overjoyed to "officially" be considered Zoro's brother, he certainly didn't want to give up his family name. But 'Roronoa Naruto' was a name that was special in its own way, because of the one who had given it to him.

/ "It could be a fake name, Kit, " / Kyuubi's voice sounded from the back of Naruto's mind.

"A fake name?" Naruto muttered.

/ "A fake name that is used to hide your real one, the affiliation you have with both Uzumaki and Namikaze. 'Roronoa' is the name everyone knows you as, but only close friends and trusted allies will know your 'true name'." / Naruto could feel the toothy smirk that graced Kyuubi's lips. *"Then, there will come a day when you reveal your 'true name' to the world." /*

That sounded pretty cool, actually...

Gaara whispered, "Roronoa Gaara," to himself, testing the name out. There was a small smile on his face. He felt *happy*. Zoro thought of him as a little brother, and that was one of the most wonderful feelings in the world.

Zoro turned to look at the two boys, saying, "Well, that lady wants us to-!" he was cut off when both boys grabbed him into a tight hug as if he would float away. "Oi! What're you two brats doing?!"

Zoro was obviously irritated, but he didn't shove either boy away. Instead, he just glared at them unamused. He had no idea what had brought this on. It was mildly annoying; like having a pebble in his shoe. Well, maybe not exactly a pebble. Maybe more like two ankle

weights he couldn't remove easily – or at all. Or whatever.

Zoro just sighed, accepting whatever brought this sudden bout of affection on. Huh...he noticed that both of them were taller. Naruto was now a head and several inches passed his waist, and Gaara was only shorter than Naruto by about three inches. His growth was more obvious because he had just barely been passed Naruto's shoulder when they first met.

He ruffled both sets of hair, with a small, genuine smile on his face. "Let's go get that bounty, brats."

Two beaming smiles accompanied by shining blue and green eyes looked up at him and nodded. "Hm-hmm!"

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Even though he was still a kid, that was no reason not share what was important information in Zoro's opinion. Since they had the privacy of being in the middle of the ocean, it was safe enough to have a conversation without fear of being overheard.

"Naruto, I have something I need to talk to you about."

The fact that Zoro had used his name got Naruto's attention. "Zoro-nii?"

"Gaara, you might as well hear this too."

Both boys paid full attention now.

"You two remember those Uchiha cousins, right?" at the nodding of a pair of heads, Zoro continued, "They asked me to look after you because the Head of their Clan wanted to use the Kyuubi to attack the village."

Naruto's jaw dropped, and he was angry for his friend. "They want to *use* Kyuubi?!"

"Yeah. Do you remember that bandaged guy with a cane back in Konoha?"

Naruto had vague memories of a man covered in bandages that always looked at him with an expression he didn't like. "Sort of..."

"Well, if you had stayed in Konoha back then...he would have ordered the killing of all the Uchiha. The Kyuubi's presence was enough to

balance out power." Zoro was very serious as he spoke. "Look, I'm telling you this because you need to understand that when you go back to Konoha, you need to know who your enemies are and who to watch out for. That means getting strong enough so that if anyone comes for you, you can kill them before they have a chance to do anything."

At the gravity of the tone, Naruto nodded silently.

"I'll kill anyone who tries to take either of you from me." Gaara said very seriously. "You're my brothers."

That comment got Naruto to grin. "Right!"

Zoro smirked and ruffled the hair of both boys.

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There came a day at a certain island in East Blue; their boat given to them by the Toad Sage had finally met its end. It wasn't built for the sort of travel the trio had been using it for, and none of them could really do any repairs beyond basic patches. Now, Zoro was wondering what they were going to do. Working on merchant vessels would only get them so far.

It was late evening and Zoro grimaced once he realized that he was unwittingly leading a couple of ten-year-olds through the Red Light district of the town. Actually, maybe the entire town was disreputable – hell, even the island. At least, they'd only be here for the night. The two boys were staring at the colorful lights and the women (and men, sometimes) wearing costumes and thick makeup – were they circus performers?

A man suddenly approached them, and he got on one knee to look at the two boys at their eyelevel. He then reached out and brushed Naruto's cheek, and Naruto stared, unsure as to what this man was doing, instinctively backed away from the unwelcome contact.

Gaara didn't like how this man was looking at Naruto; it felt almost predatory. Gaara's sand started slowly whirling around him, in subtle, unnoticeable waves in preparation for some sort of attack.

Naruto frowned, wondering who this weird man was. He smelled funny – like some sort of alcohol and sickly-sweet medicine. Internally, the Kyuubi growled, making Naruto all the more nervous, almost as if he could hear faraway whispers of the man's intentions,

but none of them were clear. He just knew he didn't like what those voices were saying.

Something protective flared within Zoro, and the man didn't seem to realize the dark aura that was emanating from the green-haired teen.

The man stood and smirked at Zoro. "How much for..." his words trailed off while his eyes widened and fear washed over him as he was positive that there was a Demon standing before him. The Demon drew his blade, and with a dangerous glint in his unnatural silver eyes, he growled,

"That's my little brother you just laid your grimy hands on, you sick bastard."

Unbeknownst to Zoro, Gaara and Naruto were both gaping at him with wide eyes.

The man quickly raised his hands in what he hoped was a placating manner, and decided that begging for his life was his best option. "I-I-I'm sorry! I had no idea! Please, don't hurt me!"

"Money, *now*."

The man quickly surrendered his valuables, and he smiled hopefully as the teen took his bag of belli from him. "So we're good then?"

"Not yet."

The man's face fell. "Huh?"

He screamed in pain when Zoro smashed his face with the butt of his sword, resulting in a broken nose and several missing front teeth; both top and bottom. There was scream as blood poured out onto the ground, and the man writhed where he lay. Some people stared, but only for a moment – believing that this was a dispute that was none of their concern. Others quickly turned away – business was business, and it was a person's own fault for getting caught in whatever bad deal they had entangled themselves in.

"Be grateful I don't cut off your hands and feet too!" Zoro just about snarled as he gave his sword a quick swing to get rid of the blood. He sheathed Wado Ichimonji and dragged his brothers away by their shirt collars. He was damn pissed off.

"Naruto! Gaara! If anyone ever approaches you like that again, you

have my full permission to kill them however you wish. Understand?"

"Okay." Gaara agreed easily, a small smile on his face.

Naruto just looked at Zoro, and compared the dark expression on his face as being very similar to when that drunk guy had attacked him years before. He wasn't sure what the man's intentions had been, but for him to have had that disturbing feeling, and for Zoro to have done what he did to the stranger, it couldn't have been good.

But there was something else about that conversation that had stood out to the boys:

This was the first time Zoro had ever said anything about them being his brothers without prompting. Such a thing had never bothered them, because Zoro had never denied them being his brothers to anyone, simply agreeing with anyone who asked. A feeling of pure bliss washed over the two younger boys, replacing any of the negative feelings they may have had after that encounter.

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At a dingy restaurant and inn located within the town that made the one in Kiri look relatively upscale, Zoro stared intently at his beer and flavorless, grease-covered food that was barely even passable to be called such.

Recalling his thoughts after running into that creep, he realized that he had thought of Naruto and Gaara as his brothers. Huh...when exactly *did* he start thinking of those two that way? Sure, he cared about them and wanted to see them succeed, but didn't anyone who cared about the people in their lives wish for such a thing?

Back when that bastard dared lay his grubby hands on Naruto, something foreign yet so familiar had reared its predatory head in Zoro. He had always been a violent person, even as a child; possibly even more so ever since he had trained under *Sword's Spirit* – and his bloodlust often had to be reined in, finding a delicate balance somewhere within controlling his temper and wielding his blades.

That feeling he had the moment when that man put his hands on Naruto felt like a personal attack; the bloodthirsty monster in him was furious; and a protective instinct that declared the man a threat that needed to be obliterated. Zoro had actually held back from cutting off the man's head – his death likely would have brought trouble they didn't need. Even though any established laws here were altogether

questionable and unspoken, and people seemed to have their own rules while simultaneously sharing a form of twisted honor and anticipated respect.

Zoro never had anyone to care for, before...and now...he glanced at the two who were adding their own graffiti to the table. This was just like the time at the coast back in the Elemental Nations when they were still in Fire Country.

He remembered something Koshiro had told him:

"We do things others don't always understand when we love someone. You'll understand if you ever have to look out for someone else's wellbeing."

...Zoro had essentially irreversibly mutilated a man simply because of how he had looked at Naruto, even when the boy was fully capable of protecting himself; and would have dished out a far worse punishment if he had felt threatened enough to do so.

Zoro sighed heavily, then took a swig of booze. Dammit. He realized that he *really* cared for the two brats – it wasn't just that he wanted them safe. He found himself wanting to be there when Naruto finally would return to Konoha as the world's greatest Ninja; shoving his success in the face of anyone who dared think that the 'Fox-brat' was nothing more than a tool or a nuisance. It seemed that for now, Gaara was happy where he was. But whatever the kid decided to do with himself, Zoro wanted to see him succeed in that, too.

Zoro's musings were interrupted when a couple approached them. The man was round-headed, his hair consisted of four thick braids, and his lips were painted black – other than the number 7 tattooed on his left cheek, there wasn't anything distinguishable about him. Zoro glanced down at the cutlass at his hip.

The woman who was with him was dressed like a poodle – fluffy hair, cat-eye glasses, and coat, wearing white gloves, a poodle skirt and hot pink heels. Her makeup was done elegantly in a way that spoke of professionalism. She didn't seem like the type of person who would even *want* to be seen in the company of a man like the one she was with.

Naruto and Gaara couldn't help but gape at the sight of the two, because this was the first time they had ever seen the true eccentricities people on the Outside were capable of.

The man's voice was just loud enough to be heard above the din of the

restaurant, "Good evening, lads," he gave a bow that was bulky and not at all graceful, despite his lithe form. "I'm Mr. 7, and this is Miss Father's Day. Might we have a seat?"

Those were certainly weird names...

Neither Mr. 7 nor Miss Mother's Day bothered to wait for an answer and simply sat down, easily ignoring the incredulous (and slightly murderous stare from the redhead) and made themselves comfortable.

"You're the Roronoa Brothers, right?" he didn't wait for confirmation as he continued, indicating each in turn. "I've heard they call you *Phantom Blade*, and *Mad Grin*, and there's a third brother, Roronoa Naruto," Mr. 7 shrugged, saying, "You're certainly difficult people to track down."

Naruto muttered under his breath about the unfairness of his brothers having nicknames but he didn't. For now, it seemed that Miss Father's Day was content in letting Mr. 7 do all the talking, as she simply sat and observed the brothers through her cat-eye glasses.

"I want to make a proposition to you boys," a sly smirk was on his features, "We're from an organization called Baroque Works, and our boss is interested in recruiting a people with your unique skillsets."

His gaze wandered over to the two youngest at their table, "We've already got a few kids within our ranks; I wouldn't be surprised if you two were to gain numbers early on. You see, we have the goal of changing the world."

...Three of the five people seated at the table thought that sounded eerily similar to a madman back in the Elemental Nations.

Zoro smirked as he leaned back in his seat, precariously balancing the chair on its back legs. Taking a swig of booze, he said, "I'll join – on one condition." Everyone looked at him; his brothers in surprise, and the two people appeared smug, "You make me the boss of your little organization."

Within their respective mindscapes, the Biju were laughing at Zoro's audacity.

Mr. 7 gaped, and it was Miss Father's Day who spluttered, "W-what?! Where do you get the *nerve* to disrespect Mr. 0 like that?!"

"That's a stupid name, 'ttebayou..." Naruto not so subtly whispered to

Gaara, a sentiment that was agreed upon.

"I don't like being told what to do."

Clenching his fists, Mr. 7 then growled out, "So you *won't* be joining us, then?"

"What about you two?" Zoro asked, casually ignoring Mr. 7 and Miss Father's Day.

"Don't wanna." Gaara shrugged.

"Nah, not really..." Naruto said.

"Well...since you know about our organization and yet have refused to join us..." Mr. 7 with surprising speed, drew his cutlass, "then you must die!"

At that moment, Zoro let his chair drop back down, and he kicked the table up. Seeing Mr. 7 move for his weapon, both Gaara and Naruto moved quickly, widening the space between them. Their food went flying (no real loss to the three), one plate landed on top of Miss Father's Day head, the greasy food ruining her hair and makeup, along with her fur coat. The rest of the food shot over the heads of several patrons before one plate hit a large man on the back of his scarred head, and the other plate hit a stern-looking woman in the face.

All was quiet with the faint music of the radio den-den mushi making the only noise for a mere few seconds. Then all hell broke loose as the two people who had unwittingly been caught in the confrontation between the Roronoa Brothers and the Baroque Works agents started yelling accusations at those who they believed had thrown food at them. Tensions rose, and within minutes, the bar descended into chaos as people started fighting.

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While Zoro's epithet gave plenty of forewarning as to what he could do, Mr. 7 had been under the unfortunate assumption that *Phantom Blade* meant that his swords were what earned him the infamous name. One second, Zoro had kicked the table up and obscured his vision, and he was prepared to cut the table in half; when suddenly there was a terrifying presence behind him.

Mr. 7 turned, and while he was able to block one sword, he quickly jumped to the side to avoid being skewered. But Zoro didn't want to

drag this out. This man's level was... perhaps close to a fresh Chunin. He was skilled, but wasn't a challenge. Unless he wasn't showing everything he could do.

Zoro smirked as he wielded his three blades, and once again, disappeared.

"Oni Giri!"

Mr. 7 managed to block the attack, but then Zoro called out, "*Sora surasshu gihō!*"

Mr. 7 went to block the attack, but Zoro seemed to vanish, and the man felt something ripple through him. Like it was far too large and forcing its way from the inside out. Seconds later, his body exploded in pain, and the world around him went black.

Zoro frowned in dissatisfaction as the cuts still weren't clean enough to pass for what he was supposed to be able to do. It was still too bloody. It had to be when he was releasing his chakra... He glanced over at his brothers, to see that they were talking to the woman.

What was going on?

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Miss Father's Day made a face of disgust as she grabbed the plate atop her head and threw it to the floor. Her hair, makeup *ruined!* Not only that, but her clothing! It was expensive getting grease out of these kinds of materials!

Her eyes scanned the room, and it was easy to spot the all-too distinctive hair colors of the younger Roronoa Brothers. The agent drew a small pistol, and fired – Naruto instinctively moved to dodge, but then the agent fired a second round.

Gaara grabbed the back of Naruto's shirt and yanked him back, and the second bullet scratched Naruto's cheek. Naruto shuddered at the close call, putting a hand against his stinging cheek which was already healing.

"Damn..." Naruto muttered, pulling out his kusarigama, figuring he would have an advantage by using both a long and short-range weapon. Smirking, he asked, "So...which one of us gets to fight her?"

"Since I prevented you getting your brains blown out, then it should

be me." Gaara reasoned.

"Oi, oi..." Naruto disagreed, and a wall of sand went up around them in response to several bullets being fired. "By that reasoning, I should get to fight her because she targeted me *first*, 'ttebayou!"

Their argument was cut short though, because Gaara decided that he'd much rather attack the woman than argue with Naruto about who go to fight her.

"HEY!" Naruto went after Gaara.

Miss Father's Day didn't know what to make of it.

Naruto charged in, using his kusarigama as a distance weapon, with Gaara coming at her with sand. She barely managed to dodge the double onslaught, and when she collapsed to the floor to dodge all of that sand – seriously, *how* was the kid carrying that much and how was he even controlling it? Was he one of those Fruit users? That was when she saw it: her partner was dead.

Shit.

If Miss Father's Day was anything, she was a survivor. But it was this fight that she realized she was losing, and Naruto only injured, while Gaara was perfectly willing to kill her. Roronoa had already killed her partner, and she didn't want to be next.

As a giant sand-claw shot towards her, the woman quickly dropped her pistols, and held up her hands. "Nya! I surrender!"

Thankfully, the claw stopped – although Gaara continued staring at her suspiciously.

"Look, boys..." she smiled, "If you let me go, I'll let you have my ship, along with everything on it."

The two boys' eyes widened for just a moment, and understandably, they stared at her incredulously.

Naruto cocked an eyebrow. "You'll let us *have* your ship?"

"On the conditions you'll let me go. I'll never bother you again."

"Why shouldn't I crush you here and now?" Gaara asked in a dark tone that caused Miss Father's Day to shiver in fear.

"Because I failed my mission." Miss Father's Day stated simply. "Mr. O will very likely send a higher ranking pair to kill me. I'd much rather not die for a long time, you know."

Naruto and Gaara shared a glance, before responding,

"Alright, it's a deal, 'ttebayou!" followed by,

"If this is a trap, I'll hunt you down and kill you myself."

Again, Miss Father's Day shivered, because she could actually feel the truth in those words. What was it with this kid? He was terrifying!

"Nya! I understand...my ship is at the far-end of the harbor. It has a logo on it – a skull with wings and crossed sabers. Not easy to miss."

"You should run." Gaara said, and his tone of voice almost made Miss Father's Day wonder if he was changing his mind. Not giving him a chance to do so, Miss Father's Day ran out of the door as fast as she could – thanking the deities that she came out relatively unscathed.

The woman made her way towards the red-light district, as she formed a plan. She would have to disappear. To do that, Miss Father's Day would have to die, too. She had heard stories about Miss All Sunday, and they were terrifying. Rumors and horror stories that served as a warning to all those who betrayed and failed to do Mr. O's bidding.

That meant someone had to take her place – and it was a hard truth, but the majority of hookers didn't have much to their name, and were hardly ever missed if they suddenly disappeared. Although here... there would likely be someone who noticed one of their employees was missing. If so, she would have to act fast.

She stuck to the back alleys, and finally found someone who was her height and had similar build. She grabbed the other woman from behind, took out a knife and – it was over before anyone had noticed.

"I'm sorry..." Miss Father's Day whispered, as she began taking the other woman's clothes – a large coat and puffy pants that had a zebra pattern. "You understand, right? I don't have much of a choice. We do what we must to survive."

As she donned the other woman's clothes, Miss Father's Day spoke softly, "I gave you a far kinder death than what Miss All Sunday would certainly give... or one of the others."

Miss Father's Day quickly put her own clothes onto the other woman, she only kept her basic top and a few other small things. Then, she reached up and pulled off the wig, and her long, dark blue hair fall around her shoulders. It was a good thing she had always worn the admittedly silly poodle-girl disguise around everyone.

After making sure that everything was set – that Miss Father's Day was going to be found dead, the former agent began wondering how she should go about leaving the island. She could make her way to the Marines – perhaps they could unwittingly protect her. Or maybe a Pirate crew, since they were always on the move. Besides, she had never used her real name, and no-one should have known what she looked like.

It was just her luck that she ran into the Captain of a small Pirate crew who was visiting the East Blue to recruit members.

"Fuehfehfehfeh!" the man laughed, "I'm Foxy the Silver Fox! And who might you be?"

The woman smiled, "I'm Porche. Happy to be serving under you, boss!"

"We have a new member!" the others cheered.

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The ship was certainly eye-catching, mostly because of the large logo on the sail. Small as it was, it was big enough for all three of them. Zoro smirked as he looked over the vessel. It would certainly fit their needs.

Gaara glanced at the Baroque Works logo carved into the side of the ship, and he knew that he could easily get rid of it in a few hours with his sand.

Naruto went into the cabin to look around. There was a desk with a few maps, along with some sort of thing...the boy picked it up to examine it. It was a globe that housed a needle, and the globe was encased in wood.

Naruto read the inscription on the wood out loud. "*Alabasta...*" Huh... wonder what that is? What is this thing, anyway, 'ttebayou...?"

Naruto put the weird globe into the desk, not seeing any real use for it just yet. The maps these people had were more up-to-date than the one Zoro had. That was useful.

Because he had mutilated one guy and killed another, all within the last forty minutes, Zoro was ready to leave. They set sail within the hour, and were off.

When Zoro checked the fridge, he smirked with sweet satisfaction. There was a collection of booze and plenty of food. What luck it was to run into that weird pair.

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A few weeks later, when Zoro was checking their food supply and he cursed silently to himself. Sure, they had been eating sparingly for the past few days until they reached another island, but he was quick to realize that there wasn't really enough to split between them. Well... he could eat a smaller meal, and the boys could eat a smaller, but still decently-sized meal—

Zoro cut off that train of thought. The boys were still growing brats. So he served the two their usual, if not slightly smaller portions, and simply settled down for a nap.

"Aren't you gonna eat something too, Zoro-nii, 'ttebayo?"

"What?" Zoro snorted. "As if, brat. I'm training."

"You look like you're sleeping," Naruto said doubtfully, while Gaara took a bite of his grilled fish.

"What kind of training? Can we train, too?"

Zoro looked at the two before glancing off to the side. "This is super-hard *extra* training. You can only do it once you're at a certain level of experience."

"Oh..." both boys said simultaneously.

"So..." Naruto grinned. "Which one of us is closer to that level, 'ttebayo?"

"...It's a level you can only achieve if you eat well and let me sleep, brat." Zoro threw an arm over his face, adding, "If you wanna train so bad, talk with your inner Beasts. Wake me up if you see an island, brats."

Both boys pouted at Zoro's response, but did as they were told.

"I *said* that he was sleeping..." Naruto muttered under his breath.

There were also a few muttered complaints about Zoro keeping cool training techniques to himself.

The following days were much the same; Zoro forwent eating, while both Gaara and Naruto ate their normal meals, even if they were a bit smaller than usual.

Both Biju were quick to catch on to what Zoro was doing. But neither of them could really put their claws onto exactly *why* Zoro was doing it. Neither of the boys seemed to realize that Zoro was skipping meals so that they could eat.

But children can only be fooled for so long.

Zoro was looking more tired, and was more irritable than usual. He mostly slept, or looked out for an island, and he started looking disheveled. His "this is training" excuse wasn't really working any more, and Zoro could tell that the two boys were looking at him with worry and suspicion.

The weight and strength-suppressing Seals he wore were even more of a hindrance than before, and he knew that he was straining his body beyond limits that were healthy. It wasn't a good idea to strain the body when you were starving. But his pride and stubbornness wouldn't let him remove them to make his life easier.

"Zoro-nii..." Naruto finally asked after what had been nearly a week-and-a-half of Zoro not eating. "Are you *really* training?"

"Course I am." Zoro lazily muttered. "Now let me sleep."

This time, neither of the boys believed him.

OoO*OoO**

Inside Naruto's mindscape, Kyuubi was shifting between amusement, fascination, and confusion as he observed what the Roronoa brat was doing. It was odd; back in that accursed Konoha, the foolish Humans were more than happy to let his container starve, with only a select few ever showing compassion and giving Naruto food – though, there were times that compassion was false because the food had been rotten. But here, Roronoa was willing to starve himself so that Naruto and the Ichibi's container could eat.

The sudden thought of, **"That brat is far too much like his grandfather"** entered his mind, and Kyuubi blinked and snorted at the

unwelcome thought. But as he observed Roronoa, he couldn't help but be reminded of a starving Samurai who had graced their precious Sanctuary with his presence so many years ago.

What was it with this kid?

Kyuubi failed to understand it. Roronoa constantly did things for both Jinchuuriki that no-one back in Konoha did, save for the select few people he could literally count out on one paw did for Naruto. He trained them; protected them; fulfilled basic needs; starved himself...

Roronoa treated both Jinchuuriki like... like they were nothing more than normal Human kits, and it annoyed Kyuubi because he *couldn't* understand it. Humans were *supposed* to be cruel, selfish, utterly foolish beings hell-bent on war. While Kyuubi could occasionally sense some sort of darkness emanating from Roronoa, none of it had ever been a concern because none of that animalistic bloodlust had ever been directed at the Jinchuuriki. But those who had the misfortune of earning that particular bit of Roronoa's ire never came out unscathed.

Roronoa was an anomaly. Maybe it had to do with both his Kūhaku and Ryuuma's bloodlines. Somehow, Kyuubi knew that for people he had never met, Roronoa was very much like them.

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Ichibi for once, wasn't forced to sleep within a watery sphere, so he was able to observe the current goings on. Humans were odd and stupid things who did odd and stupid things for reasons he failed to understand. For one, why did this damn Roronoa kid insist on starving himself so that the two Jinchuuriki could eat?

It would be way more fucking practical to kill someone and feast on their flesh until reaching the next island. Well...that was just his opinion. Not like anyone would listen to him. Wait...that sort of sounded like something Gaara would have spouted off. Dammit, was that stupid kid influencing him?!

A part of Ichibi considered whispering to his prison and mocking the stupidity of Roronoa, but then stopped and wondered if it would even be worth it. Considering how long Gaara tended to leave him dozing whenever he wasn't mad at him, how long would Gaara leave him if he *was*? Gaara had surprisingly petty tendencies, and it was best to avoid them.

Instead, Ichibi began trying to understand Roronoa's reasoning; the pros and cons of starving himself and looking completely ragged. This stupid kid had so much pride, he was willing to push himself to this extent, almost as if he were testing himself. Fucking dumbass. That's what he was.

Far too much like Ryuuma in both personality and appearance – minus the green hair and silver eyes.

Ichibi actually let out a laugh at the idea. But then paused, because he thought about the memories that had come to him upon seeing that Ikue woman's sketchbook and how he remembered miniscule details that didn't seem important; but added to the bigger picture that was actually more of a jigsaw puzzle that had blatantly missing pieces.

Ichibi could sense the doubt and the worry Gaara had after a few days of this ridiculousness. But when a few days turned into a week, then two weeks – even Ichibi maybe – *maybe* was *a little* concerned. This type of stupid stubbornness mixed with pride was how people got themselves fucking killed.

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Quiet relief came when they finally reached an island where food was available. But both boys and Biju quickly came to discover that whenever they started to get low on food, Zoro would start "training". His way of trying to get them to not worry.

Neither Naruto nor Gaara bought that excuse a second time.

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At first, it had started as a ploy to get something to eat while they were staying at a town but had no money.

\ **"Maybe the Fox-brat could transform into a beautiful woman and get people to give him food that way."** \ Ichibi had snarked.

Gaara took what his Biju had said as an ideal suggestion. "Ichibi says that Naruto could just transform into a girl and get people to give him stuff like that."

Naruto grinned, and Zoro rolled his eyes.

An unsuspecting shopkeeper reading the newspaper frowned when an unkempt-looking blond kid entered his shop.

"Mister, can I have some food?"

He didn't even spare the kid a glance. "You have money?"

"No...but I can work for it?"

"Don't need help from the likes of you urchin," the shopkeeper growled. With a violent wave of his hand, he shoosed, "Now scram!"

There was a *poof* noise, and a sensual, distinctly *female* voice asked, "But please, mister... I can work *so very* hard..."

The shopkeeper peeked around his newspaper to see a...very naked blonde woman with soft, pink smoke hiding her...her... blood spurted from the man's nose, and a grin appeared on his face.

"Can I have some food now, mister?"

"T-take whaddever you want..." the man slurred happily.

A poof of smoke filled his vision, and that same blond kid stood in the place of the woman. "Thanks!"

While it wasn't exactly ideal, it *worked*.

Naruto remembered some of the lessons that both Gramps and Iruka had instilled into him – and that was to offer to work for what you wanted. But often, people didn't want some dirty kid off of the street anywhere near their place of business. A voluptuous blonde on the other hand... that was an entirely different story.

When they *did* have money for food...

Naruto transformed into one of two personas; the brash redhead or the busty blonde – both clothed, and both were very effective.

The blonde was the one to make the most appearances, smirking and winking at waiters and asking for discounts and even free food. More than once, Naruto asked for ramen, but no place in East Blue seemed to have heard of such a dish. Naruto could only curse his poor luck at not being able to eat his favorite food in so long.

"I think I'm forgetting how it tastes, 'ttebayou..." the boy lamented.

"You're being dramatic." Gaara stated, only to receive a scowl of mild disgust.

"You only get to say that because you get to eat *your* favorites..."
Naruto muttered.

Gaara just shrugged, and turned back to eat his salted tongue and gizzard. It wasn't his fault that his tastes weren't nearly as exotic as his brother's.

Rumors began that two mysterious women would make a sudden, unexplained appearance wherever the Roronoa Brothers went, before disappearing.

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There came a day that they had no money, but passing by a billboard advertised the wanted posters of someone named Dick with a bounty of 10,000,000, and Billy with a bounty of 5,000,000.

"I'm hungry, Zoro-nii..." Naruto muttered tiredly.

Looking over the wanted poster, Zoro simply responded, "We'll get food, brat; no worries." Zoro's gaze went to the left, and he smirked. "In fact...there goes our paycheck."

A few blocks away, Billy and three other men were heading into a small pub.

Gaara let a grin come over him, because he was starving and he looked forward to the meal that was to come.

The three waited for about ten minutes to ensure that Billy wouldn't think he was being followed or something; plus it gave them a bit of time to come up with a mish-mash of a plan. Gaara took two of Zoro's swords and strapped them to his gourd, as a way to throw people off of who they were.

The three of them entered the pub, and Gaara made a face at Billy who was sitting at one of the tables and lapping at his drink much like a dog. Perhaps the man's tongue was far too big for his mouth or something. A dark thought of taking his tongue entered Gaara's mind, but that must have been the hunger talking.

There was an uneasy air in the pub; likely from the presence of Billy and the men with him. Zoro and his brothers all sat down at the bar, and the barkeep gave them an uneasy and scathing look as he took in their dirty appearance.

"Give us some food, old man." Zoro said, in his ever so brusque manner.

"Please." Gaara added quietly, like an afterthought.

"You got ramen?" Naruto asked hopefully.

"You got money?" the barkeep countered.

"Yep." Zoro jerked a thumb behind them, obviously indicating Billy.

"It's sitting right there."

Now, the air was nearly suffocating for those who were observing this exchange. Billy glared, as he slammed down his drink and slowly stood. His men smirked, and Billy took the appearances of the people at the bar; a dirty teen with a simple, white sword; an equally dirty blond kid with a small sword carrying some sort of chain weapon, and a red-haired boy with a giant gourd and two swords. They didn't look like anything he couldn't handle. And here they had the nerve to march into *his* territory and think they could take him.

"What was that?" Billy asked in a mocking tone as he slowly drew his oversized sword. The gasps from the people around him only fueled the tension and he enjoyed it. "What makes you think you can face *me*, kid? I have a bounty of 5,000,000!"

The man raised his sword as he charged towards them and swung downwards, while Zoro simply responded by drawing his sword and easily blocking the strike with one hand. It was almost pathetic, Zoro observed, that here he was starving, and a man who obviously wasn't couldn't even make Wado Ichimonji budge.

Naruto took that opportunity to suddenly charge, wielding his kusarigama and hooked his weapon through one of the odd crescent-shapes in Billy's sword and easily ripped the weapon away from the man. Gaara easily caught the sword with his sand, and already began grinding away at the metal, while another large portion of his sand grabbed one of Billy's arms and one of his legs.

"*Sabaku Kyuu!*"

Billy screamed as his limbs were partially mutilated, and now his men stood up in shock. They were ready to fight as well, but hesitated when taking in Gaara's smile; a mad-looking, wide-eyed grin.

"I'd suggest you run," Zoro said to the others, as he sheathed his

sword, but he did smirk. "Or... we can relieve you of your limbs like your boss here."

The men left quickly, leaving their commander behind. Looking at the dumbstruck and slightly green barkeep, Zoro motioned, "There's your money right there."

"Of-of course!" the barkeep quickly got down to business. He looked at Naruto curiously, and Naruto grinned.

"You got ramen?" Naruto asked again.

"...I'm sorry, I've never heard of that dish." The man seemed nervous, as if he expected Naruto to suddenly start flipping tables or something.

Naruto pouted and complained that the barkeep had raised his hopes, but ordered some kind meat and noodle dish, while Gaara went with vegetables and chicken, and Zoro was content with some sort of pasta. The three of them dug in, not caring about table manners in the slightest.

"Oi, oi, mister," a voice from behind them said, and the three turned, each with a face full of food. A man with a red Mohawk and another with pale blond hair stood over Zoro. "If you're a Bounty Hunter too, then you've gotta abide by our rules."

Mohawk glanced uneasily at Gaara who quietly growled at him, slightly throwing him off from why he had approached the three in the first place.

"Uh..." the blond man took over, "We didn't want to make any trouble for the pub, so we were waiting for him to leave."

Mohawk recovered from Gaara's rumbling threat, adding, "We had first dibs on this guy; he was our prey."

The trio just stared at the two for a few seconds before going back to eating, while only Gaara stared unblinkingly at the two while he ate.

Unnerving as it was, it was also irritating that Zoro hardly even acknowledged the two. "O-oi!" Mohawk nearly shouted, "Didn't you hear me?! There's rules among fellow bounty hunters, you know!"

"If you wanted to claim him you should have acted first." Gaara said. His gaze drifted upwards to Mohawk's hair. "...Your hair looks like a

rooster."

Naruto snorted then stuck out his tongue, "Rooster-kun is so stingy."

"Rooster?! You impudent brat, I'm Johnny and this is my partner Yosaku!"

Zoro's spoon clunked down on his now empty plate, and he rolled his eyes. He easily dispelled the situation by asking, "Do you know Hawk-Eye Mihawk?"

"Hawk-Eye...one of the Seven Warlords?" Yosaku questioned.

"I'm on a journey, with the aim of defeating him and becoming the world's greatest Swordsman." Zoro shrugged. "So we collect bounties in order to eat; so it's not like we're officially Bounty Hunters."

A smile came over Yosaku as he laughed. "The world's greatest Swordsman? Hey, did you hear that, partner? There's no way! You must be dreaming!"

Yosaku yelped when a large knife landed mere centimeters from his foot.

Gaara was glaring at Yosaku, and he snarled out, "Don't you *dare* mock my brother's dream."

Naruto slammed down his fork and stood up on his stool so that he could tower over the two men. "You're just mad 'cuz we got that guy first, Dattebayo!"

"I-I..." Yosaku started dumbly, but Zoro just ruffled Gaara's hair and gave Naruto a flick on his forehead.

"Calm down, sand-brat. Just finish eating, brat. You two can't go starting stupid fights just 'cuz someone says something you don't like. If I cared about the shit people said about my dream, I'd never've left my home island."

Gaara backed down, but still glared at Yosaku. Naruto gave the two Bounty Hunters the finger, much to their chagrin, and plopped back down in his seat and began stuffing his mouth.

"It was what I was determined to do since I was a kid, that's all." Zoro said. Yosaku would have continued saying how laughable Zoro's dream was, but the unblinking glare of the redhead boy made him

hesitate. "Anyway, I didn't know you had claim to him; sorry."

Zoro smirked as he motioned to his brothers. "You can have the bounty, but my brothers need to eat; so our lunch here is on you." Zoro turned to the two beside him. "Eat up, you brats."

"Hai~!"

"Fine..." Johnny agreed, only slightly hesitant. He didn't like the conspiratorial glance the two boys shared. Perhaps the two men wouldn't have agreed so readily if they had known just how much two growing boys could eat...

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Johnny and Yosaku counted their belli from Billy's bounty.

"4,970,571 belli..." Yosaku said. "Well...that's not *too* bad. We can still split it."

"How could two kids *that* small eat *so much*?" Johnny wondered aloud. Sure, the blond had eaten more than the redhead, but still; they could pack it away.

"You think that guy really was Zoro?" Johnny finally asked.

"What, no way..." but the way Yosaku had said it showed that he wasn't completely sure himself. "I mean, he had that white sword, but rumors are he carries three; and he only had one. And it's not like he's the only green-haired person here. There also weren't any girls with them..."

It was an odd thing, because neither of them could say whether or not that they had made a mistake. The boy's hoodie was red, and that was what they could have seen; he could have been wearing it up and then took it down, revealing a mess of blond hair. Sure, that redheaded boy had a gourd for some reason, but he was carrying two swords...

The Roronoa Brothers were dangerous, but...there wasn't a girl in their group as far as the rumors had stated; having heard that sometimes a foxy vixen would make an appearance before misfortune befell the prey.

Johnny wondered about the odd teen back at the pub. It was silly, saying things like 'the world's greatest', but the way the teen had spoken to the redheaded boy;

"You can't go starting stupid fights just 'cuz someone says something you don't like. If I cared about the shit people said about my dream, I'd never've left my home island."

"Hey, aren't you happy about the money?" Yosaku asked when he realized that Johnny was spacing out.

"Why'd you become a Bounty Hunter?"

Yosaku was surprised by the question, "What? So I could eat of course!"

Johnny glanced up towards the village. "Growing up, my village was much like this one...bandits came in and did some pretty deplorable things. But then that would bring in the Bounty Hunters as well...I so badly wanted to be like those dashing men, you know? I thought they were heroes. It wasn't until I was older that I realized it was their job, but still..." Johnny had to smile. "They saved lives."

"Yeah," Yosaku agreed as he thought about when he first became a Bounty Hunter. It was a chance for adventure, and to be a hero for those who couldn't defend themselves.

Their reminiscing was cut short, though, when there was an explosion a few blocks away. Both men jumped, and quickly faced towards the noise.

"Oh, no...that's Dick!" Johnny stated, as 'Dick' made his way through town, carrying his hand-cannon; with his men following close behind. They were looting the town, while Dick had a frown on his face.

"Someone here beat up my little bro and took him away," Dick said, although upon closer inspection, the frown was mocking. "This is just reimbursement for his loss."

"Stop, you jerk!" a voice shouted, and a small boy ran at the men.

The boy didn't make it very far when Dick simply kicked the boy to the side. The boy slid into one of the buildings, and groaned painfully as he curled into himself.

"We gotta do something!" Johnny said, drawing his sword.

"Y-yeah," Yosaku hesitantly agreed. This was a man with 10,000,000 bellies on his head – Yosaku was fairly certain they could take him if they worked together, but even if they couldn't, Dick fighting them

meant he wasn't killing anyone else.

The two men charged forward with their blades drawn, yelling out, "Surrender, Dick!"

Dick just looked at the pair and smirked.

It was over before it barely even started.

Both men laid there, bloody and beaten, and Dick was ready to crush their skulls.

That was when a voice declared, "Oh, hey, it's Rooster-kun and Mop-Head!"

Everyone glanced at the owner of the voice, and that was when they noticed the trio. A blond-haired boy; a redheaded boy; and a green-haired teen.

The redhead stared at Johnny and Yosaku with impassive sea-green eyes. "Oh...it's them. Let's leave them to die."

"NO!" both Johnny and Yosaku quickly protested.

"Hey..." the green-haired teen started as he tied a bandana that had a cloud and dragon pattern around his head. "You two don't mind if we take that guy's head, do you? We need the money."

"Yeah," the blond agreed, pulling his fox-eared hood up. "Stupid boat people won't fix our mast unless we have enough money; stingy bastards."

The redhead pulled a pair of goggles over his eyes and grinned. "We won't need to claim another bounty for a while if we turn your head in. I don't think it matters if it's attached to your body or not."

"It can't be..." Yosaku said under his breath as he watched the teen draw *three* swords. Yosaku felt a sudden urge to go skewer himself because he had been giving *Roronoa Zoro* a hard time. No wonder the younger boys had been so annoyed.

Dick either didn't know or didn't care about the three newcomers, because he just smirked even more as he gloated. "Oh? You think you can beat me?"

"Hey, boss?" one of the men spoke up nervously. "I think that's the Roronoa Brothers..."

"Is that so?" Dick questioned as a bloodthirsty grin came over his face. "Then the bounty on my head will go up if I kill the three of you!"

Dick fired a cannonball at them, and everyone prepared for the worst when the three didn't immediately move. But they were all in for a shock when a wall of sand suddenly appeared in front of the brothers, effectively stopping the cannonball. Gaara grinned as his sand morphed into a large hand that clutched the cannonball and easily threw it at the rest of Dick's gang who screamed as they quickly scattered.

That was when everyone who was observing let their jaws drop. The area that Zoro had been standing was now empty. Zoro was simply gone.

Dick rapidly looked for his target, while his men tried to fend off the two boys.

"Oi, Gaara, leave some for me, 'ttebayo!" Naruto complained, as he took out his kusarigama and charged at the men.

One man charged forward with his sword raised against Naruto, and he swung his sword down with the intent to kill. But, his sword was stopped just feet from Naruto's head, thanks to a wall of sand that had encircled the blond. The man blinked dumbly, before the sand suddenly whipped around, and he was forced back. The bandit tried to dodge the odd attack, but suddenly; a chained weapon swung by him, and he fell to the ground in a bloody heap.

The other bandits gaped as they watched one of their own get killed by two kids – they obviously weren't mere children. That was a combined attack that had been purposeful.

It was a lethal combination as Naruto charged in; followed closely by Gaara. From what the others could see, the pair were a near-flawless tag team. Whenever anyone tried to attack Naruto, a wall of sand would rise up around him; which would then whip around and force them to dodge – right into Naruto's swinging kusarigama/short sword combination.

Naruto suddenly broke away from the shield, and spun with his kusarigama through the bandits.

"Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu!"

A cutting whirlwind sliced through them, and they could barely

defend against it. One would have thought that the attack would have cut through those observing, or even the buildings, but it was as if the wind was perfectly controlled by an external force.

"In-incredible!" one of the villagers watching exclaimed.

If anyone of the bandits tried to attack the redhead directly, the sand around him rose up too fast for any one of them to get a proper hit in – not even guns worked. Sneaking up behind him proved useless as well.

Another bandit thought that he could break the sand shield, and struck the sandy dome covering the kid as hard as he could with his club – only to have the sand wrap around his weapon and his hands. The man screamed when the sand crushed his hands – and then wrapped around him completely, before crushing him.

That sand acted as both an offense and impenetrable defense. And now, the bandits were scared. There was no way to fight these two!

Dick snarled as he fired another cannonball at Zoro who was simply too fast to get a proper hit in. It was as if Zoro was simply "ghosting" in and out of sight as he fought Dick, and those watching it couldn't believe their eyes.

"Sora surasshu gihō!"

Zoro suddenly appeared *behind* Dick; as if he had phased *through* the Bandit, and simply sheathed his swords. At first, it didn't look as if anything had happened to Dick, but then he jolted as several cuts appeared on his torso as if something were slicing its way out. Dick collapsed to the ground, and Zoro smirked slightly as he turned to look.

"Damn, that was still too messy. Still an improvement, though." ... Considering what had happened to the others.

Johnny blinked dumbly as he watched the scene unfold. The two younger boys easily dispatched the rest of the gang, and then made their way towards Zoro.

"Not fair, Zoro-nii, you had that big name guy all to yourself, 'ttebayo." Naruto complained half-heartedly.

"None of them really had anything worth taking." Gaara added in a bland tone. Still, he held up a mishmash of weapons that he had

filched from the men in a sand-hand. "I got this, so maybe I can make some of Naruto's weapons with them."

Naruto grinned at Gaara in thanks.

"Good job, brats. Next time, I'll let you two take on the bounty."

"Really?!" Naruto asked excitedly.

"You mean it, Zoro-nii?" Gaara's eyes shined.

Zoro nodded. "I'll only step in if it looks bad."

"You killed him..." one man said, as he checked Dick's pulse. "Not that I'm complaining...I don't think anyone is."

"That...that was amazing!" both Johnny and Yosaku shouted elatedly.

"Aniki, you were so cool!"

"Let's work together!"

"What?" Zoro questioned after taking in their declaration.

"We aren't sharing." Gaara said defensively. It wasn't clear if Gaara was talking about the bounty or Zoro; but it was likely both.

"Are we gonna team up with them, 'ttebayo?" Naruto asked.

"I guess?"

"Yay!" the two men cheered.

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As they sailed along with their small ship that was tied to the Roronoa Brothers' slightly bigger ship, Johnny and Yosaku were certainly happy that they had teamed up with the Roronoa Brothers; but the brothers were even crazier and stranger than the rumors had led them to believe.

When they saw Zoro training with large weights that he had gotten from *somewhere*, while he had his brothers sitting on the dumbbells while they lifted their own large (but at least still normal sized) weights, they were certainly surprised. Johnny and Yosaku were oblivious to the longsuffering manner that Zoro sometimes used when it came to the crazy amounts of energy they exhibited; they got along

well with Naruto who shared their crazy energy; and Gaara...well... Gaara didn't seem to like them very much.

It seemed that Gaara could hold a grudge, and he often glared unblinkingly at the men; Yosaku specifically. Yosaku chose to keep himself busy and did his best to ignore Gaara whenever he was within the boy's sight. But even being on a separate ship didn't really allow Yosaku the escape he would have preferred, but he did his best.

After five days of this, Johnny then took it upon himself to play peacekeeper.

So, one afternoon, Johnny approached Gaara. He balked for a second when he saw the smattering of weapons with hundreds of thousands of grains of sand flowing over them. The sand wasn't exactly corroding the weapons as it normally should have, but rather was shaping them into star-shapes and there was a collection of odd-looking knives next to Gaara. They weren't smooth by any means, but definitely looked lethally sharp, and had a circle on the bottom of the handle for holding? Johnny couldn't remember what the knives were called... kuna...kunai?

He watched as Gaara was also rolling a shiny ball of sand around in his hands, and a few minutes later, a kunai slowly emerged from the ball. Gaara broke up the sand ball, picked up another one of the swords and began winding a new ball of sand around the sword before it was completely absorbed by the sand.

"Uh, hello, Gaara-nii-chan."

"I'm not your brother."

The tone was icy, and Gaara's sea-green eyes glared daggers at Johnny.

Johnny had come this far and had worked up the courage to talk to the off-putting boy, and he wasn't sure if he could work up the courage again sooner than he would like, even if the boy *didn't* have weapons surrounding him. "Oh...okay...um, are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Listen...um...Yosaku is scared of you-"

"He should be."

Johnny sort of balked at that statement, but he persisted.

"He *does* want to be...friends with you, but he thinks you're..." Johnny wasn't sure if he should use the word 'scary' as aptly as it described Gaara, but thought better of it – he didn't want to insult the boy. "... intense. Why don't you seem to like being here? Your brothers seem to enjoy it."

Gaara was quiet, and Johnny wasn't sure if he would get a response. The redhead continued rolling the ball of sand around in his hands as it slowly developed a pleasant sheen and another kunai dropped to the deck.

"He laughed at Zoro-nii's dream."

Johnny blinked and looked at Gaara, who was staring intently at the ball. "He laughed and it's not nice to make fun of people like that. He laughed without knowing what Zoro-nii promised and how hard he works to become the best Swordsman. He *will* become the best." Gaara glared defiantly at Johnny now, as if daring him to disagree, adding, "The only reason you like Zoro-nii is because you know who he is now. You didn't care when you didn't know who he was. Now, you're calling him 'brother'; but you don't have the right to."

That was the most Gaara had ever said to Johnny, and now the man thought that he understood where Gaara was coming from. For Gaara, the idea that Zoro *couldn't* do something was unthinkable. His admiration for Zoro was so strong, that he felt he had to defend Zoro when others looked down on him. And the fact that both Johnny and Yosaku had only showed their admiration and respect after Zoro had beaten Dick... Plus, Gaara must've thought that they were trying to replace someone in their family, given how he didn't like them referring to him and his brothers in such a familial way.

"I see, so that's it then?" Johnny asked. "You know... your brother's dream to become the best Swordsman is laughable in the 'it's unbelievable' kind of sense. I mean, you've gotta understand: this is East Blue. Sure, Gold Rodger came from this ocean and did the impossible; but... not many people have the same courage as Aniki does. They say dreams like that are a fool's errand."

Gaara's stare wasn't as intense as he looked up at Johnny. "Gold Rodger?"

"What? You don't know who Gold Rodger is?" Johnny asked in genuine disbelief. Gaara shook his head.

Johnny sat down across from the boy, and animatedly began talking. "Alright, let me tell you...let's see...it all started around 20...22...years ago? Anyway, the greatest Pirate to ever live was Gold Rodger, and he started this Great Age of Pirates by doing the impossible..."

Gaara listened intently as Johnny told him what amounted to the greatest story to ever come out of East Blue and shook the world to its core. It was so fascinating, that Gaara didn't even realize he had stopped working on Naruto's weapons.

After talking with Gaara, Johnny approached Yosaku and whispered, "Listen, Yosaku – I think what you need to do is apologize to Gaara."

"Apologize?" Yosaku whispered back harshly, not at all believing that a simple apology would be all it would take for him to not feel as if his very life were being threatened. "Seriously?"

"Gaara threatens new people all the time."

"AHHH!" both Johnny and Yosaku screamed at the sudden appearance of Naruto, who grinned at them.

Both men gave Naruto a glare before getting back to their conversation.

"Look, the kid thinks the world of Aniki, and well...just do it, okay? Apologize for laughing at Aniki's dream."

"That's what this is about? It's been over a week!" Yosaku exclaimed.

Johnny just gave him a pointed look, and Naruto was more fascinated with the apple he had pulled out of the barrel he was sitting next to.

"Fine," the man relented. "But if it doesn't work and he kills me, I'm coming back as a spirit and haunting you."

That same evening, Yosaku approached Gaara nervously, and quickly muttered, "I'm sorry for laughing at Aniki's dream."

Yosaku had honestly never been so scared in his life – and he had gone up against dangerous criminals – but Gaara was in his own league. He honestly didn't think it would change anything. So after apologizing, he quickly retreated below deck and busied himself with cleaning his sword.

A few days later, there was a skirmish with a few Pirates who had low

bounties, and Yosaku had gotten a nasty gash on his leg that most definitely needed stitches. It was in an awkward location, and if he had been by himself, Yosaku would have had to contort his leg in attempt to suture it.

Surprisingly, Gaara stepped up to help him treat it before anyone else could.

"Zoro-nii gets hurt a lot, and Naruto and I help bandage him." Gaara stated very seriously. "But he always sleeps and he gets better like that, too."

Yosaku only nodded at that weird statement, and sat down at their dining room table so that Gaara could work on his leg. He was only slightly nervous, as this was the first interaction the two had had in days – at least Gaara wasn't glaring at him anymore.

"Oh..." Gaara said gravely when he saw Yosaku's wound.

"What? What's going on?!" Yosaku twisted around trying to see what Gaara was.

The redhead was very serious as he said, "That looks really bad...I think it'll have to be cut off."

Sand slowly started emerging out of Gaara's gourd.

"WHAT?!" Yosaku shouted, recoiling. He had seen what that sand could do, and it was altogether unpleasant.

Offering a smile, Gaara replied, "It'll be okay...you can get a peg leg – just like that one Pirate had."

"*LIKE HELL!*" Yosaku shouted, another octave higher.

Johnny, who had been observing the exchange quickly stood and was ready to intervene, but was stopped by Zoro, who shook his head. Looking back questioningly at the teen, Zoro just smirked. Looking over at Naruto, the other boy just shrugged. His expression was that of someone who was resigned.

Before Johnny could say a word, Gaara had a pleased smile on his face that honestly got both Johnny and Yosaku to stop what they were doing. Neither of them had any idea Gaara could have an expression like that.

Poking Yosaku's knee, the boy said, "I'm joking."

"Why the *hell* would you joke like that?!" both Yosaku and Johnny demanded.

Once again, Gaara was very serious as he replied flatly, "It was funny."

And with that, Gaara started suturing Yosaku's wound closed.

Johnny looked at the boy disbelievingly, and slightly disturbed. He snuck a peek at the other Roronoa brothers – Zoro was simply snoring away with his fingers laced behind his head – how could someone fall asleep that fast, Johnny couldn't help but wonder, and Naruto was cleaning his short sword with an intense look of concentration – even though it looked perfectly clean.

"...I really don't think that sword could get any cleaner." Johnny pointed out, deciding that he'd much rather focus on something than wonder at Gaara's odd humor. He was now accepting the eccentricities that encompassed the brothers.

"I have to take good care of it," Naruto said with a smile. "It's the first thing Zoro-nii gave me. It's my treasure."

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It was more than obvious that Zoro had different goals than Johnny and Yosaku. While the two were happy simply sailing around East Blue and collecting bounties, both Zoro's and Naruto's dreams would be taking them elsewhere.

But that had brought up another conversation altogether.

"So, you can navigate, right?" Johnny asked, concern evident in his voice. "When I say that, I mean, beyond the basics of well, sailing out here in East Blue."

"Yeah," Yosaku agreed. "You *do* realize how dangerous the oceans are in the Grand Line? And don't get me started on some of the stories I've heard about the islands!"

"Is it really that dangerous?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto-nii-chan, when people go to the Grand Line, they want *actual* navigators!" Yosaku replied. "There are stories of people getting lost at sea or shipwrecked, and those are the tame ways for

people's adventures to end."

Johnny was speaking now, "I've heard that in the Grand Line, there's a phenomenon called "Weather Spots" – or "patches". Basically, they're areas varying in sizes where multiple types of weather exist at once."

The man nodded gravely, to show the seriousness of the conversation. "These patches can last several minutes, and at that time, they can tear ships like ours apart."

"It's not that big a deal," Zoro said with a yawn. "We'll just sail around 'em."

"Aniki, these patches are entirely unpredictable!" Yosaku nearly shouted. "That's what makes them so dangerous! You can't just *see* them and decide to sail around them! You'll never know when they'll happen, how big they are or how long they'll last!"

Zoro frowned. "We're in the ocean, and those storms are in the sky. All we've gotta do is just cut through it."

"You can't just-!" Johnny started, but then he stopped, and briefly removed his glasses so that he could pinch the bridge of his nose. Replacing his glasses, Johnny spoke slowly, "Aniki... you're an amazing swordsman – incredible, even. But you *can't* just cut through one of those storms like that. I mean, I've heard of people dealing with typhoons, ice storms, and giant waves, all at once. Those things alone wreck ships."

Zoro shrugged. "We're strong enough to deal with it. The brat can just use his Wind Jutsu, or I can use one of my Demon Cutter techniques."

"I don't think it'll work for me like that, 'tchbayou..." Naruto muttered.

"We're going to go to the Grand Line to die." Gaara said very gravely. His eyes landed on Naruto. "You'll be the first of us to die, because Zoro-nii and I will have no other choice but to feast on your flesh and break your bones for the marrow."

"Why does it have to be *me*?!" Naruto demanded.

"Because you're the youngest." Gaara explained simply. "Natural selection."

"Natural selection' my ass!"

Gaara ignored Naruto as he looked up at Zoro. "Zoro-nii will be the next of us to go. By dysentery, I imagine."

"What?!"

"Then, I'll eat him, too." Gaara's eyes then went to the horizon. "Since I'll be all alone, I'll have no other choice but to kill myself. I'll randomly select a spot in that vast expanse of ocean, and throw myself overboard into the dark abyss."

Gaara nodded, as if he had made the decision final. "All of this tragic misery could have been prevented..." his gaze slowly landed on Zoro. "If we just had a real navigator."

Zoro stared at his younger brother for a moment before sighing and putting a hand up, "Alright, you know what? Fine, fine. We won't go to the Grand Line without a *real* navigator. Happy?"

Gaara smirked in his victory. "Elated."

While Naruto didn't like the fact that he had been cannibalized in Gaara's absurd and macabre fantasy, he was glad that they weren't heading towards their watery deaths.

00oo00

There came a day when it was time to leave Johnny and Yosaku. The two men cried manly tears as they simultaneously called out from their boat, "A-NI-KI! GA-ARA-NII-CHAN! NA-RU-TO-NII-CHAN!"

"Yeah, yeah..." Zoro muttered. He wasn't sure how he attracted these sorts of people; and he hoped that their travels would be relatively peaceful from here on out.

"Bye, Rooster-Head! Bye, Mop-Head!" Naruto called out, waving both arms.

"...Don't die a stupid death." Gaara said very intently, staring at both men with unblinking sea-green eyes.

Somehow, he made it sound like a threat. But it was the thought that counted.

Chapter End Notes

****About Belonging****

"You must go on adventures to find out where you belong." – Unknown

"After all this time, I know exactly where I belong." – Meg Rosoff

00o + o00

So much happened here.

Blatant Shout-out to LoZ: Majora's Mask. Yes, I know it's Termina, but the spell change was for reasons.

BigBrother!Zoro has finally, fully accepted his role. Also, he now has a different epithet, since he has a Kekkei Genkai and all.

Gaara will find his sea-legs eventually. I also figure he'd be selfish when it came to "sharing" Zoro.

Naruto is well on his way to becoming an awesome Ninja – he's making it up as he goes. It's what he does best. He'll get his epithet, no worries!

Kyuubi and Ichibi are also slowly coming 'round.

As for Mr. 7, when we saw the pair in Alabasta, they didn't strike me as being particularly strong. So this guy simply didn't last that long.

00oo00

Christmas in the OP world, yes, it exists!

Christmas celebrations in Japan is completely different from how it's done in the US. It's actually more like a romantic holiday than it is a religious one. I figure that in the OP world, they do have variations of Christmas, and would have their own forms of celebration. Different islands/countries + different cultures = different customs. I think in the world of One Piece, there's a form of pseudo-Christianity; and then it's probably broken down even more by various people's traditions/superstitions.

8i8

Another thing – I'm looking at you, OP-filler writers – Okay, so Wado Ichimonji withstood Mihawk, the world's number one Swordsman, mind you – while Zoro's other swords broke – and YET, and YET Zoro freaking broke his most precious sword

because he was too rough with it? It couldn't withstand Zoro's strength but stood up against Mihawk? What, did the blacksmith repair the legendary sword to be much stronger or something? I demand answers for something inconsequential that happened like 20 years ago! *bangs desk*

"4,981,571 belli..." Yosaku said. "Well...that's not too bad. We can still split it."

29,429 belli worth of food was pettily consumed, and it was delicious.

The Promise we made when we were Children, Do you remember it?

Chapter Summary

Arriving in Shells Town, Zoro ends up getting on the bad side of a bowl-cut man on a power trip. Not wanting to get anyone else in trouble, Zoro agrees to be tied to a pole for a month. Exhausted and starving, memories of Kuina and his time at the dojo come back to Zoro. He's determined to survive this - not just for Naruto and Gaara's sake, but for the promise he made years ago.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for filling my inbox with those emails. It was like Naruto eating at Ichiraku's on someone else's tab.

/"Kyuubi speaking within his mindscape."/

\ "Ichibi speaking within his mindscape." \

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shells Town wasn't much to look at, if anyone were to be honest. The paint on numerous buildings was faded, and a few of the structures were in dire need of repair. If it weren't for the people living there, it could almost be considered a ghost town.

People nervously glanced at the three new arrivals off of some odd ship, and there were fishermen who didn't bother to stick around long enough to sale or trade a thing. Not like anyone in this town could bother to sale or trade anything anyway, since they were barely scraping by. Zoro and his brothers purposefully walked forward, ignoring the stares and whispers with practiced ease.

"We'll find a restaurant and inn, and see if there're any bounties." Zoro muttered, not liking the vibe this town gave him. Since there was a Marine Base, maybe that was doubtful. "Perhaps we can work for some food."

"Yeah," answered Gaara and Naruto, both cautiously glancing at the people watching them.

Naruto didn't know what to make of the people. They weren't

suspicious; cautious, yes, dangerous? Not really. But there was something just *off* about them.

Gaara slightly tugged at his scarf with two fingers, trying to work out what was bothering him about this situation. That fisherman they had passed by at the port had been in a hurry to get out of there. Maybe because of crime? But that didn't make sense, because weren't the Marines supposed to watch out for that sort of thing?

A few minutes later, they heard snarling and several screams; one sounded like a child, and the other sounded like a woman in hysterics. Zoro, Naruto, and Gaara quickened their pace and turned the corner to see a wolf that had a vice grip on a little girl's leg. A tall woman was desperately trying to pull the dog off of her daughter.

Without prompting, Zoro rushed forward and sliced cleanly through the wolf.

"RIKA!" the woman shouted, grabbing the girl into a tight hug.

"W-wha...what...?" A man with a bowl cut stuttered out, blinking a few times as he tried to process the scene. He looked at Zoro, and yelled – well, more like whined loudly, "That was my darling pet daddy bought for me you brute!"

Zoro just sheathed his sword and glared coldly at Bowl Cut guy who sweat dropped nervously at the harsh gaze. "D-don't you know who *I* am? *I'm* Marine Captain Morgan's precious son!"

"So what?"

"So...so...what?!" Bowl Cut looked anxious, but that slowly began going away with every word he spoke. "You're under arrest for disrespecting *me*!"

"*WHAT?!*" Naruto demanded. "Your stupid dog was attacking that girl, 'ttebayo!"

"A brat like you should know how to address their betters!" Bowl Cut shot back childishly.

"Fuck you." Gaara muttered under his breath, glaring at the man.

Bowl Cut pulled an expression at Gaara's comment, and actually *shrieked* at Gaara, "How *dare* you speak to *me* like that, you little brat!"

Bowl Cut withered instantly under Gaara's intense gaze, but he chuckled – somewhat apprehensively – and seemed to think that he still had some sort of power. "You not only killed my dear puppy that Daddy bought for me, but you disrespected *me*, Helmeppo, Captain Morgan's son!" Helmeppo was slightly more observant than many people gave him credit for as he observed the three newcomers. "Unless...you surrender yourself, Roronoa Zoro."

It *had* to be Zoro, because who else had three swords like that?

"If you don't, I'll arrest this woman – for killing my pet. It'll be so unfortunate, me having to take away a little girl's mother when she's the sole provider of the family! A poor little girl, all alone – we might have to ship her off to the orphanage depending on how long her mother is away!" Helmeppo's gaze went to the two boys as he smirked, "Along with your brothers – boys their age shouldn't be without a caregiver. Or maybe because of their profession, they could end up in prison?"

Rika yelped and clung tightly to her mother, who glared at Helmeppo, but said nothing. She didn't dare, because the man would stick to his word and worse.

"But you-!" Naruto started to argue, but Zoro cut him off.

"Naruto, stop."

"That's a good boy," Helmeppo said, and Naruto resisted shuddering. "Listen, I like to think I'm a nice guy, so," he shrugged, "If you agree to be tied up in our courtyard for a month, I'll let you go, and this little family won't have to be broken up any more than it already is!"

"One month?" Zoro asked, and he stared at Helmeppo, making the man slightly uneasy. "You'll leave these two alone and my brothers won't get in trouble, either, right?"

"Zoro-nii, you can't-!" Gaara started to protest, but Zoro stopped him.

"Think of this as training, alright, Gaara?"

"But this *isn't* training!" Gaara nearly shouted out of frustration.

Not liking this one bit but knowing how stubborn Zoro could be, Naruto spoke up, "I'll take care of your swords while you're there..."

"Not a chance." Helmeppo said, a malicious grin coming over his face.

"We can't take such a risk."

"What *risk*?!" Naruto demanded, clenching his fists. Even Kyuubi was growling at the man.

/"I don't like that sniveling bastard one bit. He's too full of himself."/

"We're just going to take care of Zoro-nii's swords!" Naruto argued.

"It's a security risk." Helmeppo said flippantly. "Now, let's not waste any more time. Come, Roronoa."

*\ "I wanna rip that smug look off of that little bastard's face." *Ichibi muttered.

Zoro tied his bandana around his head and walked away with Helmeppo and the Marines accompanying him.

"I'm sorry..." Rika stared to cry. "This is my fault..."

Gaara slowly reached over and patted her on the head. "Our brother is strong. He'll survive this."

"We'll find a way to take care of it, no worries, 'ttebayo!" Naruto forced a grin.

Rika's mother stood, and held her daughter so that she wouldn't have to walk. "Why don't you two come in? You can stay the month while waiting for your brother."

The two boys nodded, and followed the woman into the restaurant.

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Zoro nodded off, but kept getting jolted awake by a spasm in his arms. It was particularly hot today, and he could see the heat drifting up off of the ground. A raven-haired girl was standing in front of him, a mildly exasperated expression in her dark eyes.

Honestly, Zoro-kun? Letting something like this stop you?

"Don't look at me like that, Kuina..." Zoro muttered. "Bastard son was gonna kill that woman and her kid...couldn't risk it..."Or was it arrest? He couldn't recall at the moment. He shifted, trying to get comfortable, but there wasn't much leeway. "Not like I could kill some bigshot's kid... 'S our livelihood. That's all I gotta do, is survive for three weeks. This is nothing."

Stubborn idiot...you're still that little kid who challenged me endlessly.

"Yeah, guess I am..." Zoro said, as he drifted off, unable to fight off sleep any longer.

O00o00O

Zoro was awoken by someone shaking his shoulder. It was dark out, and the moon barely lit up the courtyard.

"Zoro-nii, you have to drink this!" a girl with red hair was shoving a bottle of water into his face.

Alright, so Zoro desperately drank the liquid down, not realizing how appreciative of water he actually was until it ran over his tongue and went down his throat. He was only slightly disappointed when Naruto pulled the water bottle away.

"You shouldn't be here." Zoro rasped, voice hoarse from disuse.

"You smell funny." Gaara said, as he quickly shoved a rice ball into Zoro's mouth before he could complain and object.

Zoro took in Gaara's appearance: black hair and blue eyes – still, he had the raccoon eyes. That would give him away too easily, Zoro thought. It was humiliating, honestly, for his brothers to see him like this.

The rice ball was too sweet, and it should have been awful, but right now it was the best thing he had ever eaten. Since when did such simple food taste so good? Zoro swallowed the overly sweet rice ball before speaking, "Not like I can help it, sand-brat."

Giving a wave of his hand, "You two need to go. Just stay away, and I'll be fine. It's only been... a week? A week and-a-half?" He wasn't even sure anymore. "Think of it like training. I just gotta last the rest of the month."

Blue eyes met Zoro's silver ones.

Naruto was frowning in disapproval. "You aren't training. You always say that when you don't want us to worry."

"...You said that before, and you nearly fainted." Gaara spoke quietly. "Ichibi thinks we should kill everyone in the base. Then we can leave."

Of course, neither of his brothers bought that 'I'm training' excuse for

years; and Zoro hadn't exactly bothered to think up a new one.

Zoro snorted. "Of course he'd come up with something like that. No, that'll just cause trouble for everyone else."

Gaara looked as if he wanted to argue, but lights came on around the base, indicating it was time for the two boys to leave. "We'll be back."

Zoro simply watched them leave, and slipped back into himself as his mind wandered.

*0*0*

- + *Crescent Island: Shimitsuki Village, thirteen years ago* + -

The moon was full that night, and Koshiro was on his way to his room to turn in, when he heard a ruckus over by one of the storehouses. It was far too late for people to be making this much noise, so Koshiro made his way over to a trio of his students; all early to mid-teens who were standing around the small building. They were arguing with each other, and with a fourth person; someone inside the storehouse, Koshiro figured.

Except he didn't recognize the voice and the speaker sounded very young. That was when Koshiro also noticed that the teens were sporting various injuries; it wasn't anything *too* serious, just a few scrapes and bruises, while another had a bloody nose. Fortunately, it didn't look broken.

"*What's going on here?*" Koshiro asked, his voice causing the trio to nearly jump out of their skin.

"*Oh, sensei!*"

"*It's just you!*"

"*AHHHHHH!*"

Koshiro ignored the scream, and looked on expectantly.

"*Someone broke into the storehouse here!*" one teen said quickly.

A young voice from somewhere inside the storehouse responded indignantly, "*I told you idiots before, the building moved into where I was walking!*"

"*That doesn't even make sense, thief!*" the first teen shouted back angrily.

The person in the storehouse responded flatly, *"That's 'cuz you're a dumbass."*

"Why you little...!"

Koshiro put his hand on the teen's shoulder. *"That sounds like a child."*

"Well—"

"Let me, it's far too late for this." Koshiro said with a sigh. He stepped into the storehouse, and crossed his arms. Putting on his best, strict sensei voice, he said, *"Young man, come out of there this instant."*

He heard grunting, following by a young boy who crawled out from under one of the larger shelves with a large enough space – a place where only a child could fit into. The boy had a mess of green hair, dirty and patchy clothing, and a thick stick in one of his hands, and numerous scrapes and bruises, with a few Band-Aids on his arms, and one on his cheek. The boy wouldn't look at Koshiro as he sniffled, obviously trying not to cry.

Frowning, Koshiro squatted down to the boy's level. Maybe he had been a tad harsh. *"Hello there, I'm Koshiro. What's your name?"*

The boy wouldn't look at him as he muttered, *"R-Roronoa Zoro."*

He was pouting? How odd.

"Nice to meet you, Zoro-kun. You know, it's a bit cramped in here, can we talk outside?"

Zoro glanced up at him with odd, silvery eyes through thick, green bangs. *"I don't have to fight those idiots on my way out, do I?"*

"Oi!"

Koshiro quirked an eyebrow, glancing at the stick in Zoro's hand, and then turned to look at the three teens behind him. *"He did all of that to you with that stick in his hand from his position under the shelf?"*

"Well, he's small..." the youngest of the teens started, wiping the blood on his nose away.

"And very fast!" one of the other teens thought to helpfully add.

"And you three have been coming to my dojo for how many years now?"

"You got a dojo?"

Koshiro turned back to Zoro, who was now looking at him with an expression of barely contained excitement and anticipation.

"I do."

"Oh... Can I see it?"

"It's late. How about I show you around in the morning?"

"Alright." Zoro easily agreed.

"Can I ask how old you are?"

"Seven."

"Where are you from?" Koshiro asked as he led Zoro towards the dojo.

"Tsukiyama village." Zoro answered easily. *"But they moved the village and I couldn't find it again."* Zoro scowled as he continued. *"So I started walking and your storehouse ended up on top of me and I couldn't get out."*

Koshiro frowned at the unusual comments. *"Tsukiyama is several miles away from here!"* As in nearly twenty miles, alone and in the dark. *"How did you end up walking that far?"*

"The paths moved or somethin'."

"Alright...well, perhaps we should call your parents to let them know where you are. Do they have a Den-Den Mushi?"

His house was one of the few in the town to have one, fortunately.

"Don't got any parents." Zoro replied as he eyed the barrels filled with bokutō and decorative scrolls along the walls with interest. The boy shrugged. *"Never did. And no, they don't. I can sleep right here."*

Koshiro quickly stopped the boy from lying down right where he was on the wooden floor and guided him to a spare room. Or at least, tried to. Zoro kept wandering off at random times, went right when he was instructed to go left and vice versa, or he simply went back the way they came. Zoro insisted that the halls and rooms were moving, and that Koshiro's directions were confusing. Being somewhat tired of dealing with this, Koshiro simply took hold of the boy's shoulder and led him to the room. After making sure that Zoro was settled in, Koshiro decided to take Zoro back in the afternoon.

In the morning, Zoro only got slightly turned around before he came out into the main part of the dojo. There were several boys practicing with the bokutō, and there was one girl who was facing off against an older boy. The boy shouted as he charged, bokutō raised.

The girl sighed, and simply swept the boy's feet out from under him and bonked him on the head.

"Pathetic."

"Hey!" Zoro walked up to her. *"You seem strong! Let's fight!"*

Instead of responding to his demand, she simply asked, *"Are you one of father's new students?"*

The teen groaned from his place on the floor, *"He's the kid who got locked in the storehouse last night."*

"Oh?" the girl turned towards Zoro. *"You're the one who gave him that black eye, right?"*

The boy looked as if he were going to protest, but grumbled, *"Whatever..."*

"Let's fight!" Zoro demanded again.

The girl walked over to the boy on the floor and picked up his bokutō before handing it to Zoro.

"Shouldn't I at least get my opponent's name before we spar?"

"Roronoa Zoro!" Zoro took up a stance that he was pretty sure swordsman did. *"You better remember it, 'cuz I'm gonna be the greatest swordsman ever!"*

The girl smirked, and before Zoro knew what was going on, he was looking at the ceiling and his head was throbbing.

"I'm Kuina...you're going to have to at least beat me before making such ridiculous claims." Kuina pulled Zoro to his feet. *"I intend to prove I can become the greatest Swordsman in the world."*

Zoro stared up at the girl, and grinned. *"I'm gonna beat you someday!"*

"Zoro," Koshiro's voice interrupted their conversation. *"Come eat*

breakfast then after a short tour, I'm taking you back to Tsukiyama."

Zoro grumbled and complied, but suddenly turned down the hall he had just come from. Koshiro was quick to catch him and redirect him.

"The dining room is this way," Koshiro gently berated. He sighed at the sight of an already developing bruise on Zoro's cheek. *"Try to pay attention, yes? I'll also get you something for that bruise."*

Zoro glared at the man. *"Your directions were confusing!"*

Zoro pouted, and Koshiro thought it was odd, if not amusing.

Although Zoro did enjoy various aspects of touring the dojo, he was put out that he had to leave later that day.

Half an hour later, Koshiro hitched his mule to its cart and he and Zoro were on the way to Tsukiyama. Zoro pouted about not being able to stay at the dojo, and Koshiro simply let the boy be.

When they arrived at the orphanage, a woman who was out front looked absolutely relieved to see Zoro.

"Oh, thank you! Thank you!" she affectionately patted Zoro's head, and giggled when he scowled and pushed away, not enjoying the affection. *"Why don't you head in, dear, after thanking this kind man for bringing you back?"*

Zoro muttered a *"Thanks, Koshiro-san,"* and walked a few feet when it was if Zoro shifted without actually physically turning around and headed back towards Koshiro and the woman.

"I'm Suzi, by the way – I run the orphanage with my husband..." the woman introduced herself to Koshiro, entirely missing what Zoro had just done. She glanced Zoro's way when she spotted him out of the corner of her eye, and sighed quietly.

"The door's that way, dear..." the woman said tiredly, as if she had experienced this countless times already.

"The building moved!" Zoro immediately defended.

Suzi hadn't seen the odd shift, but Koshiro *had*.

"What on earth...?" Koshiro started, as he stared at the boy. What exactly was that? Had he imagined it? To be sure, he asked, *"Zoro-kun...have you ever eaten a Devil Fruit?"*

"No way I could ever eat something like that." Zoro replied automatically. He then paused. "...What's a Devil Fruit?"

Wondering at the odd answer, but saving it to ponder over later, Koshiro was very serious as he explained, *"It's a strangely colored fruit with swirled patterns on it. I've heard it tastes awful."*

Zoro shook his head. *"Never ate anything like that."*

"Zoro-kun, one moment." Koshiro said, and he got the attention of Suzi. *"How long has this been going on? His...wandering?"*

"It started when he was around five, I think. At first, it was getting turned around in the house, but..." she looked uneasy. *"This is the first time he's wandered off so far..."*

Something about this seemed *familiar*, but Koshiro couldn't exactly place it. His mind scrambled somewhat, trying to make the connection. The storehouse had most certainly been locked, and there was a latch higher up that was impossible for Zoro to reach. Besides, how would he have unlocked a latch he couldn't reach, get inside and close the door, and somehow lock it again, all without a key? *"...Has he ever gotten into someplace locked before, without using the key?"*

"He somehow ended up in the attic, once. It was locked and requires a ladder to access..." Suzi looked at Koshiro curiously. *"How'd you know...?"*

"He got into my locked storehouse without unlocking it." Koshiro racked his brain even harder for *why* this sounded so *familiar*. *"Would it be alright if I took him? I run a dojo, and he expressed quite a bit of interest in swordsmanship. I could keep him out of trouble."*

"Oh! That would be wonderful!" Suzi was delighted, and when Zoro realized that he was returning with Koshiro, he pretended not to be excited.

The woman went with Zoro to help him pack. Among his items was a green haramaki that was far too big for him – Zoro would have to wait until he was at least in his mid-teens if he wanted to wear it. This was something that he had been told his parents had left behind for him, and it was the most expensive thing he owned.

"I'll train really hard, and be the best swordsman ever!" Zoro declared to Koshiro as they rode back home, nearly bouncing in his seat with unbridled energy. *"I'll beat that Kuina girl too."*

Because even at his age, he could tell that *she* was the one to beat.

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If only, Zoro could have kept his determined declaration to Koshiro. The man sighed as Zoro yelled out in pain as Kuina whacked him across the face with her bokutō. This had been going on for a week. Zoro would grab a bokutō, and yell out to Kuina, 'fight me' and he would end up on the floor with another bruise. Once, she had knocked out one of his molars much earlier than it was supposed to come out, and all they could do was wait for his adult tooth to come in.

Even at his age, Zoro easily defeated the other dojo students, and only struggled against a few of them. Zoro had a tendency to get violent; with a grin on his face whenever he was fighting that was often off-putting to the other students. Koshiro noted the natural ease the boy had with swords, and it made him wonder just who the boy's parents had been. He would definitely need to learn control though... his ferocity made him waste movement and energy when he succumbed to it.

Today, Zoro grabbed as many bokutō his fists and his mouth could carry. Zoro's words were muffled as he spoke around the bokutō in his mouth, "*oday Augh bea yoo Guinma!*"

Which translated to, 'Today I'll beat you Kuina!'

"*Shouldn't you master one sword before using all of those?*" Kuina asked indifferently, cocking a thin eyebrow.

"*Shuggup!*"

Zoro charged, and as usual, Kuina whacked him across the face. All the bokutō landed around him, and Zoro glared, the beginnings of a rather nasty black eye was already obvious. "*I'll beat you one of these days, just you wait!*"

Zoro started training intensely every day for hours; and the other boys around him – even those who had been training at the dojo for years – had a hard time keeping up with his stamina and sheer determination. Every time Zoro finished training, minutes later he was seeking out Kuina with his usual cry of, "*Fight me!*"

This went on for months, and those at the dojo found that they could set their clocks by Zoro's antics. One day, their schedules were slightly thrown off because Zoro wasn't shouting for Kuina to fight him.

"I'm gonna train harder so I can finally beat her!" Zoro resolutely promised.

He now only went after Kuina every few days. Kuina humored him by accepting the challenges, but every time, Zoro was knocked to the floor. With each defeat, he trudged back to his room nursing a new bruise and making a tally mark on his wall for every defeat as a reminder of how hard he needed to work. He glanced at the empty side that would mark his wins against Kuina. He would put a mark on that side one of these days.

"How long are you going to have those black eyes and bruises for?" Kuina asked with a quirk of her brow; which at this point, was her go-to expression for him as she observed Zoro writhing on the floor as he held onto what was likely a broken nose. *"You've been dead many times over."*

"I'm gonna defeat you one of these days!" Zoro promised. He then went to Koshiro so that the man could help fix his nose.

Kuina by now, simply accepted the fact that Zoro would be challenging her, and that it would be part of her routine. Zoro started training even harder for longer periods of time; this time, he was sure – he would finally beat her. Zoro challenged her every few days for the next six months, and lost painfully every time.

Then came a day when Koshiro was observing his students spar, and as usual, Zoro was challenging Kuina. Everyone else wasn't that much of a challenge for the boy, and Kuina was the only one he had yet to beat.

At least this time, Zoro was holding his own for a few minutes longer than usual. Koshiro had to give a small, humored smile. That was when it happened:

Kuina and Zoro were currently in a standoff – their bokutō were pressed together, and if those had been steel swords, they would be giving off sparks. Kuina shoved Zoro away, and went in for a strike on Zoro's exposed left side – when he shifted; ever so subtly. He had *moved* without really moving his body. If Koshiro hadn't been paying attention, or had his Ninja training for observation, he almost wouldn't have caught it.

Zoro had dodged the attack, and grinned as he was sure that he would finally beat her. Koshiro blinked at the sight – and Kuina was surprised; clearly caught off guard. But Kuina was a natural, and she

instinctively moved to parry; and she knocked Zoro off of his feet.

"Nice one, Zoro-kun." Kuina teased. *"You almost had me there – if only a little."*

Zoro glared up at her, and this time, he grabbed his bokutō in frustration and marched off. *"I'm gonna go train!"*

"The grounds are that way..." Kuina pointed out, and Zoro just stuck his tongue out at her.

"I know that, the doors just move!"

Zoro managed to find his way outside and trudged off, pouting.

Koshiro though, was observing carefully. Just *what was that?* He *knew* that he had read about something like what Zoro had just done from somewhere...or he had heard about it... Koshiro sighed, as he couldn't recall whatever it was. It was mildly frustrating, because the whole reason he had decided to take Zoro in was because the boy was obviously different; but he couldn't put his finger on what it was.

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One day, a ten-year-old Zoro kept staring at the ceiling whenever he passed that point in the dojo, and he got an odd, spaced-out yet focused look to him.

"What are you looking at, Zoro-kun?" a boy named Enji asked, looking up at what appeared to be a blank ceiling.

"I dunno." Zoro replied. *"There's something up there, though."*

"But there's nothing on the ceiling." Enji pointed out.

"It's not on the ceiling." Zoro replied, not taking his eyes off the spot. He didn't know why, but whenever he walked through this particular part of the room, there was an odd feeling that tickled at his senses. Like something was *there*, but he couldn't see it. There was an odd pull; like someone trying to play hide-and-seek; they hid every part of themselves, except a small part of them was exposed, and Zoro could see them – like their toe peeking out from wherever they were hiding. Or maybe they were actually well-hidden, and it was because he could hear them breathing. That was what it was like.

Enji just accepted it as being one of Zoro's growing list of oddities, and went about his own business.

Zoro had a hard time pulling himself away from that spot, but he managed.

A few days later, it was lunchtime, and everyone but Zoro was there.

"Where's Zoro?" Koshiro inquired.

"He's staring at the ceiling again," Enji replied with a shrug. "He's been doing it for like a week, now."

"The ceiling?"

"Yeah," Enji jerked his thumb. "There's a spot in the living room right by the west hallway where he just stands and stares up at the ceiling for no reason." Enji snorted. "Weirdo."

Koshiro quickly stood and left, leaving Enji, Kuina, and the others somewhat confused at his behavior.

Sure enough, the man found Zoro staring up the ceiling. Koshiro's eyes slowly drifted upwards, and he furrowed his brow. The room above that particular spot had several Seals on it to keep people from finding it – in fact, they were *supposed* to ignore the room altogether. Not even Kumojiro, Yumie, or Kuina knew about that room. And now... Zoro was staring up at it.

"It can't be..." Koshiro said to himself, although he was still doubting the thought. It had been nearly...how long...fifteen, sixteen years, he honestly couldn't remember, since he had thought about it. It hadn't even occurred to him as a possibility.

But it explained things.

And he remembered; back in the Elemental Nations...

There had been a Clan that had resided in Kiri – or at least near it – a Clan that everyone believed had gone extinct overnight nearly 168 years or so previously, at the time that he read about them, and their disappearance had started a myriad of ridiculous and terrifying ghost stories. They had been called the *Kiri no Yuurei*. Officially, they were called the Kūhaku Clan.

Their abilities were left up to speculation, but supposedly they made

perfect guides through mazes; they could get into locked places easily; they had the ability to "fade-in-and-out"; and there was something about Genjutsu...

But that was impossible. How could the Kūhaku come out *here*? Had they known about the barrier?

This was all just a theory; and a dubious one at that.

An equally ridiculous idea popped into Koshiro's head, and it would allow him to test his theory. There was a Harvest festival tomorrow, and they would have a corn maze. Koshiro wasn't sure if such an absurd-sounding idea would even work, but it was worth a try.

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Kuina looked at her father as if he were insane as he suggested that *Zoro* actually *guide* them out of the corn maze after they had wandered around long enough to get lost themselves.

"*Sure*," Zoro said as he confidently strode forward, and Koshiro just followed.

"*Let's go, Kuina. We don't want to be stuck in here for longer than we have to, do we?*"

"*With him guiding, we will be.*" Kuina muttered in annoyance.

Much to her surprise however, not once did they come to a dead end; nor did Zoro even hesitate at any point. They exited the maze in record time, and apparently there was a prize for having the shortest time – they had beat the previous record holder by a good 32 minutes.

In fact, she overheard one of the workers talking to someone else, saying, "*How is anyone else going to beat this?*"

Kuina couldn't figure out how Zoro had navigated his way through the maze while he always got lost in a place he had lived for the past three years.

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Zoro was *sure* he was ready this time – he hadn't challenged Kuina for nearly a year, and he had trained so hard for this day. This would be their *3,000th* fight. That deserved something special. So he approached the older girl with confidence. "*Let's you and me fight on*

the hill tonight. With real swords."

Kuina gave Zoro her usual look of indifference, but there was a small, teasing smirk. *"You sure you're ready to take me on, Zoro-kun?"*

"Just be there!" Zoro bristled at the comment, and he glared when he apparently reacted exactly how Kuina expected him to.

The moon was full that night, and its light glistened off of their swords. Zoro had two; and Kuina had her one – surely, he'd have the advantage of having one extra sword and he had been training so *hard* that his blisters had turned into calluses and his hands and mouth had even bled from the strain of lifting weights... that *had* to count for something, right?

He and Kuina charged at each other, and like always, it wasn't even a contest. Kuina had read his movements; she had twisted, ducked low and struck true.

Zoro fell to the ground, a stinging sensation on his cheek from a small cut. It showed her level of control and mastery of her sword. Kuina didn't even have a cut on her. Zoro clenched his teeth and finally, the sheer frustration and the disappointment of his failure after all that hard work going to waste reared its ugly head. Zoro started crying as he balled his fists and tried to cover his face, because it was shameful to cry after losing – especially in front of a girl.

"Dammit! I just can't win! Why can't I win?! I've been training so hard!"

"Hey..." Kuina started, her voice not carrying the usual indifference. *"Why're you crying?"*

Zoro sat up, not exactly glaring at her, but she could see the clear frustration the kid in front of her held. *"I wanted to beat you this time (sniff)...that's why-why I kept to myself so I could train and-and..."* Zoro quickly stood up, trying not to look at her so he could hide the fact that he was crying. He rubbed the tears and snot away, and turned to face her in defiance. *"This is nothing! I'll just work even harder, just you wait. I'll finally defeat you!"*

Kuina looked at Zoro sadly. *"You know...I should be the one crying. That day could be coming much sooner than you think."*

"What? What do you mean?"

Kuina grabbed a developing breast with her hand, causing a blush to

cross Zoro's face. *"Because I'm a woman. That's why father won't train girls. He says that a woman isn't meant to be a Swordsman; they aren't strong enough. So one day, you'll easily beat me because of the fact you're a boy."*

Zoro gaped at her. *"That's bullshit!"*

Kuina paused at Zoro's outburst.

"What exactly have I been training for all this time if I'm just gonna beat you because of something so stupid?! What have I been working towards?!" Zoro pointed at her. *"I'm gonna be the best Swordsman in the world, and if I'm gonna be the best, that means I'll have to face you!"*

Zoro held out his hand, a determined look on his face.

"Promise me! One day, either you or me will be the greatest swordsman in the world!"

Kuina started crying as she looked at Zoro, and a small smile had broken through her usually stoic demeanor. *"You idiot..."* a small, wet laugh, *"Why..."* she gripped Zoro's hand in hers. She could feel the calluses on his hand; proof of how hard he had trained just for this moment.

She was happy, because there was one person who believed in her; and that was all she needed. Kuina was determined to prove her father wrong; that women *could* be Swordsmen; that *she* could be *more*. She would rise and be the best; and she would show the world the storm that was hidden beneath her calm. She would prove taking over her father's dojo was her birthright, and she would show the world what a master of *Sword's Spirit* could do.

"Of course, one of us will rise to the top."

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The next morning, everything started as usual. Zoro was up before the sun, and he raced out to train with the weights because if he had any chance of ever beating Kuina, that meant he would have to get stronger physically – and get better at using two swords instead of one. He had to work hard to catch up to her, and he was determined to do just that.

Zoro was lifting weights long after the sun came up, and that was when three boys from the dojo approached him. Enji, Shouto, and

Mario all had blank looks on their faces.

Zoro furrowed his eyebrows as they approached him. *"What's with you three? Did you see-"*

Zoro's sarcastic remark was cut off when Enji said, *"Kuina...Kuina is dead!"*

"What?" the weight Zoro had been holding in his mouth fell to the ground with a muffled **thwump**. *"You're joking."*

Enji shook his head, fighting back tears. *"She died last night...she fell down the stairs to the supply room..."*

Enji didn't get a chance to finish as Zoro ran towards the main house. It was a joke, it *had* to be! It was some awful and cruel joke that those idiots thought up!

Zoro ran until he reached a small crowd standing in the courtyard of the dojo, and he pushed his way through to the front. The boy froze as he took in the sight of Kuina's body lying on a stretcher, her face covered by a small, white cloth. He could tell it was her by the clothes and a birthmark that was on her arm.

Zoro couldn't hold himself back as he yelled, *"What the hell do you think you're doing you idiot?! What about our promise?!"*

"Zoro-kun, show some respect!" one of the older boys ordered, and Zoro glared up at him, and the boy immediately recoiled from the dark expression on Zoro's face.

Someone behind them was speaking, *"Oh, no...that poor girl. What happened?"*

Another member of the dojo answered, *"I'm not sure. She apparently went down to the storeroom for a sharpening block. She was using her grandfather's sword, for some reason."*

At that comment, Zoro's breath hitched and his eyes met Koshiro's, and Zoro never felt more terrified and ashamed. He quickly turned on his heel and ran away from the crowd; away from Koshiro; away from Kuina; and tried to hide from his guilt.

The following day, with his eyes downcast, Zoro marched in Kuina's funeral procession. He didn't dare look at Koshiro. He was terrified to face the man.

Koshiro wanted to speak with Zoro, but the boy was avoiding him at every turn. Zoro would eat at odd hours, and completely went out of his way to avoid him. Koshiro remembered the look that Zoro had given him that day in the courtyard – a look of guilt and shame. He remembered hearing Zoro say something about a promise, and it had Koshiro curious as to what exactly had gone on between the two.

At a nearby waterfall, Zoro was working out. He was pushing himself to train harder, because if he did, he wouldn't have to face that nagging feeling in the back of his mind. He wanted to cry and yell and punch things until they were as broken as he felt, but he was a boy and boys weren't supposed to cry.

She was there, constantly in the back of his mind; or she stood as a shadowy figure in the corner of his eye, only to disappear when he looked. So he trained harder, trying to ignore her. It was exhausting.

This game of avoidance went on for nearly a week – and Zoro's Kekkei Genkai unwittingly assisted him in getting away from Koshiro as the man sought him out. Emotions often fueled Kekkei Genkai before they got under control, so it was likely that Zoro didn't even realize what he was doing. Koshiro could see Zoro – looking haggard and stressed, and there were bandages around his hands with faded blood – Koshiro frowned. What was Zoro doing?

Finally, Koshiro caught Zoro when the boy was training out at the posts. Zoro held a pair of bokutō, one in each hand. Zoro was hitting the posts as hard as he could. Koshiro could hear the bokutō crack under the strain, and there was blood dripping from Zoro's hands. Zoro didn't hear Koshiro's approach, and when the bokutō finally shattered, Zoro collapsed to his knees, panting heavily.

Koshiro's voice was quiet. *"Zoro-kun."*

Zoro stiffened, and slowly turned to look up at the man with exhausted, wide, silver eyes.

"Why don't you take a break? Let's go inside. I want to speak with you."

"I..." Zoro started, and he honestly looked as if he were about to run.

"Now, Zoro-kun." Koshiro's tone left no room for arguments.

Slowly, Zoro walked with Koshiro, and he drug his feet, staring intently at his shoes.

Koshiro led Zoro to the dining room, where rags, salve and fresh bandages were set on the table, and sat him down before sitting next to him. He took Zoro's hands in his, and carefully unwrapped them. Koshiro avoided wincing at the bloody cuts and bruises that covered the boy's hands. He had seen injuries like this before; on adults and on children that adults had driven to train, but never really expected a child to willingly push themselves to such an extent.

Silently, Koshiro began treating Zoro's hands before bandaging them again.

"You need to take better care of your hands if you're going to be a swordsman, Zoro-kun." Koshiro's gentle admonishment was met with silence. Taking a deep breath, the man asked, *"Zoro-kun, why have you been avoiding me?"*

Zoro wouldn't look at him. He took in a shaky breath before mumbling, *"...my fault."*

"What?"

"Kuina...it was my fault." Zoro's shoulders started to shake as his emotions refused to be held back any longer. *"I-I asked her to use real swords in our last fight, and I-I killed her."* Tears ran down his face as he stared at his hands, which were now wrapped with fresh bandages. His declarations to her now felt empty. He would never put a tally mark on his side of the wall. A life that once held so much promise had been snuffed out because of him. *"She needed the sharpening stone because I..."* Zoro was sobbing at this point, and now... *"...it's my fault she's dead, and you'll hate me now and'll wanna get rid of me because I killed Kuina!"*

As Zoro was speaking, Koshiro couldn't help but think of Kakashi – Kakashi hadn't been as emotional, but it was the same expression. A broken boy who had the weight of something he never should have had to bear. Koshiro had failed Sakumo; he had failed Kakashi; he had failed Yumie; and he had failed Kuina. But now... he wouldn't – *couldn't* fail Zoro.

As Zoro declared his last statement, Koshiro pulled Zoro into a tight hug.

The boy stopped briefly – confused, looking up at Koshiro. Koshiro-sensei, who never openly displayed affection. Koshiro simply held him tighter, and Zoro leaned into the hug as his body racked with sobs.

When Zoro calmed down, he still hadn't pulled away and Koshiro hadn't let him go. The man spoke quietly.

"I don't blame you, Zoro-kun. If it's your fault, it's just as easily mine as well. Humans are such fragile beings." Koshiro held back his own emotions for the sake of Zoro, but he was failing. His own tears fell onto Zoro's hair. *"I could have taught her so much, but... but I was a coward. Kuina was so much like me...she inherited a true swordswoman's spirit."*

Zoro went quiet at that, and Koshiro continued. *"I once knew quite a few women who would've had my hide if they knew what I had said to Kuina... she would've made an excellent swordswoman."*

"Then...then why?" Zoro's choked voice asked. *"She wanted to be the best. She wanted to prove it to you."*

"Because I was selfish and afraid." Koshiro admitted. *"I knew the type of life she wanted to live, but... I wanted her to have the life of a civilian."* Koshiro couldn't help but give a bitter laugh. *"I reasoned it was because I loved her, and wanted to protect her."* At Zoro's curious expression, Koshiro explained, *"We do things others don't always understand when we love someone. You'll understand if you ever have to look out for someone else's wellbeing."*

Zoro frowned, not really being able to imagine himself as being someone who cared for others the way sensei was describing. Most people were scared of him. Koshiro was the closest thing he had to family, but there had never been a reason to look out for his wellbeing.

"I wanted her to settle down and have a family, like a regular girl would. I wanted her to be safe. And now..."

'Look where that got me,' went unsaid.

"What if I had showed her how to properly fight, without a sword? If only I had just let her live her dream, and trained her, perhaps then she'd still be alive." Because then she probably would have known how to fall, and would have instinctively done something, *anything* to ensure not getting hurt. The likely injury she probably would have gotten was a broken arm at worst or a few scrapes and bruises at best. Koshiro pulled away from Zoro so he could lift the boy's chin up and look him in the eye. *"You see, Zoro...it does no good to look at the past and wish things could be different. You can't focus on 'what ifs' and 'if only'. Your regret will ruin you."*

Zoro looked down, tears still streaming down his face.

"You were her goal, Zoro-kun. You showed her that she could improve."

"What?" Zoro looked at Koshiro disbelievingly. *"But I never beat her!"*

A sad smile showed itself on Koshiro's lips. *"Because she had to work hard to make sure she could win every time. You actually came close more than once, but Kuina always had to find ways to push forward."* Koshiro smiled sadly. *"It was a testament to her skill."*

Zoro couldn't believe it. He had almost *beat* Kuina? Zoro paused when a thought struck him.

"Kuina's sword...can I have Kuina's sword?"

At Koshiro's questioning look, Zoro explained, *"We promised to become the greatest Swordsmen...if I have her sword, I can carry on her dream. Please, I promise to take good care of it."*

Koshiro just nodded, and wordlessly, he stood up and retrieved the sword from his room. He handed Zoro the sword, and with a solemn look he said, *"Roronoa Zoro, this is Wado Ichimonji; and it has been in my wife's family for generations. It would have gone to Kuina. I now entrust its care to you."*

Zoro had an awed look as he took the sword.

"Kuina's grandfather, Kenjiro wielded this blade with pride. I suspect you can do great things with this sword as well..." then, Koshiro added, *"Zoro, I want you to rest up today, and tomorrow, I want to have a serious discussion with you."*

00oo00

The next day, Zoro met Koshiro in the front room. Koshiro motioned for Zoro to follow him, and he let the boy go ahead of him as they went upstairs. Zoro wasn't really sure what was going on, as Koshiro was letting him go where he and Kuina... go into his personal living quarters. The upstairs was closed off to students, and only in emergencies or something like that were people allowed up here. As Zoro neared the top, that odd, pulling feeling was slowly getting stronger.

He naturally gravitated towards it, and Koshiro made no move to stop him. Zoro didn't stop walking until he reached a door that was

covered in papers with intricate writing.

"What's that room?"

"This is what I wanted to talk to you about." Koshiro said, as he placed a hand on the door. His hand glowed blue with chakra for a moment, leaving Zoro to gawk at him.

"What was that?!"

"Chakra."

That answer didn't really satisfy Zoro, and he was about to ask more questions when Koshiro opened the door, and led Zoro in. Zoro looked around, taking in the sight of scrolls that covered a shelf; a sword case; some sort of bandana with a weird, metal plate swirly symbol on it; various weapons – kind of like what Ninjas used, which was really cool, and upon seeing them, Zoro's eyes sparkled – and there were three framed photographs on a shelf. One was with a young Koshiro with people Zoro had to guess were his parents; another was with a young Koshiro and three other people – all of them wearing that weird bandana with that symbol; and the third, was with a man with white hair, a toddler with wild white hair, a woman with dark hair, and Koshiro. This one looked to be the most casual, as the three adults were laughing at something, while the boy was just giving the camera a disinterested gaze.

There was a map on the wall; yellowed with age.

"Zoro-kun..." Koshiro said seriously, as he pointed to the locations on the map. *"I'm from a place called Konohagakure, located within the Elemental Nations. It's a long and complicated tale as to how I came here... but, that's for later. I believe you are a descendant of the Kūhaku Clan – they resided in Kirigakure I believe."*

Koshiro pointed to the tiny country of Kiri – a place that was practically in the middle of nowhere in the ocean.

"They disappeared from the Elemental Nations, and no-one knows what happened to them. People often referred to them as the Kiri no Yuurei, and there are literally hundreds of stories surrounding that particular Clan. The stories surrounding them were quite frankly, bizarre and morbid."

Turning to face Zoro, he gave a small smile, *"I'll be sure to tell you a few of them. Anyway – your abilities; the shifting, getting into locked places,*

even getting lost, but also why you could detect this room, even when others couldn't."

Zoro silently bristled at the 'lost' comment, but didn't interrupt, absorbing all of this information.

"What you have is what's called a Kekkei Genkai. Now...I don't know everything about the Kūhaku, as at the time I read about them, they've been gone for well over 150 years."

Zoro was trying to wrap his mind around all of this. He was a *what*, now? But Koshiro continued on, obviously saving any questions for later. And now, it seemed that Koshiro was talking to himself just as much as he was Zoro.

"I think you could very easily find your way through the barrier; they must have found their way through, back then, too. It's just a matter of finding that island... Anyway," Koshiro was focused on him again. *"I don't know much about the Kūhaku's abilities, so if you are serious about becoming the greatest Swordsman, I suggest learning how to get a handle on your Kekkei Genkai, and that means you'll have to go here."*

Koshiro tapped on the country titled 'Kiri' once again.

"Or, we could experiment—"

"I want to go." Zoro said, with clear determination. *"The people there are strong, right? Then if I get strong and master my Kek-kai..."*

"Kekkei Genkai," Koshiro provided.

"Kekkei Genkai, I can become the best Swordsman."

"Alright, then." Koshiro nodded. *"I'm going to teach you all of my techniques, along with Jutsu. The Elemental Nations is incredibly dangerous for anyone, even if they were born there, and trained their entire lives. So you're going to have to listen to what I tell you, understand, Roronoa Zoro?"*

Zoro answered with a determined nod.

Koshiro seemed to focus on something else for a moment before he added, *"Another thing... I will also teach you Sword's Spirit. It's not exactly a technique I can master myself, but I can set you down the path to learning it."*

The other boys weren't really jealous of Zoro getting extra training from Koshiro, or the fact that he had received Wado Ichimonji. Koshiro certainly still showed them how to fight and kept up the usual classes, but Zoro was obviously in a different class than they were altogether. He had the skill and the ambition, and the bandaged and bruised harried look he often wore nowadays wasn't one to be envied. The boys at the dojo were only there because they wanted to learn how to fight properly, or had goals like becoming Marines or working with local law enforcement, so having knowledge of some sort of fighting skill was a must.

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Some weeks later, Koshiro made his way to Tsukiyama, wanting to have a talk with the people at the orphanage. Suzi and her husband Yasuhide, along with a few others; Kuniko, Mio, and Benny, all worked as caretakers, and Suzi remembered Koshiro immediately.

She beamed brightly at him the moment she saw him. *"Oh! It's you! How's Zoro-kun doing?"*

"He's fine." Koshiro answered. *"Has the goal of becoming the world's greatest Swordsman."*

"Ah, Zoro-kun has always been so driven. It's nice that he has a goal." Yasuhide said with a definitive nod. *"So, Koshiro-san, how can we help you today?"*

"Does the name 'Kūhaku' sound familiar to any of you?"

Each of the caretakers looked at Koshiro curiously, and each shook their heads in the negative.

"Can't say that it does..."

"Well...what about the Kiri no Yuurei?"

Again, each of them shook their heads.

"Why are you asking?" Benny questioned, cocking an eyebrow. He lazily shrugged and added, *"Um, these are odd questions."*

"Yes, well..." Koshiro's Shinobi training kicked in slightly here, mostly out of instinct. Plus, how exactly was he supposed to explain that he was from a country that had been hidden away, and that Zoro was from a Clan that were from said country? He would sound like a

madman.

"Zoro-kun honestly reminds me of someone I used to know, years ago. But...maybe I'm mistaken. It's been a long time." Koshiro gave a shake of his head. *"Could you possibly tell me how he ended up here?"*

It was Kuniko who answered, *"Well, nearly eleven years ago – on a night it was storming pretty badly – someone left him on our doorstep. He was only a few days old, wrapped in that green haramaki and there was a note with him as well."*

"A note?"

The older woman shook her head sadly. *"It said nothing more than his date of birth, along with the simple message of, 'we can't take care of him'. Didn't even name the poor child, at least, if they did, didn't bother telling us. I will say that he was certainly well cared-for when he came. Wasn't starving and had been cleaned up, unlike most children that age when they come to us. Unfortunately, some people have children only to realize they can't or don't want to take care of them."*

"Where did his surname come from?" Koshiro asked, wondering if he could possibly somehow gain a clue from that – even though that would have been reaching. But the smallest details could have the biggest results.

Yasuhide looked flushed as he rubbed the back of his head in an embarrassed manner. Even Suzi looked mildly embarrassed.

"Eh, you see, Koshiro-san... 'Roronoa' was my favorite Pirate character... from a book." Yasuhide admitted. *"It sounded like a strong name."*

Suzi covered her face as she mumbled just coherently enough for Koshiro to hear, *"'Zoro' is the name of a mysterious heroic swordsman in my favorite romance novel... I just changed the spelling up a bit... Oh, kami... I never thought we'd actually have to admit where our inspirations for names come from!"*

"I promise I won't tell anyone." Koshiro said solemnly, although there was certainly humor in his eyes. *"I was just curious, thank you."*

Koshiro bowed and left, and now, he was wondering just who Zoro's parents had been. There was no-one with the surname 'Kūhaku' on Crescent Island as far as he could tell, which just upped the mystery.

Nearly four years later, Koshiro approached a teenage Zoro who was standing by Kuina's grave.

"It's almost time." Koshiro said.

Zoro nodded, and spared one last glance to Kuina's grave. He was determined to do right by her.

Koshiro had an odd look on his face as they walked towards the port. He appeared to be deep in thought.

Koshiro speaking was nearly unexpected. *"Zoro-kun."*

"Hmm?"

"This is a selfish request, but... would you mind going by Konoha and passing along a message for me?"

"Of course." Zoro replied without hesitation – because after everything that Koshiro had taught him, how could he not do something as simple as pass on a message?

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It had been weeks, but finally, they had reached the small island that Koshiro remembered had been near the fog-covered island when he first came on the Outside. They sailed seemingly pointlessly for a while, until they came to a place where the fog had appeared seemingly out of nowhere, looming over them.

Koshiro motioned to the fog. *"You'll need to head that way."*

The Captain of the small ship looked hesitant. *"There's nothing out that way, mister."*

"It's alright," Koshiro said softly. *"We won't be here long."*

With Koshiro's help, Zoro prepared a small dinghy. Zoro was about to climb in, when Koshiro stopped him. In his personal opinion, it didn't seem like the best of ideas sending a fourteen-near-fifteen-year old to place like the Elemental Nations; when was anyone ready, really? But Zoro was skilled enough, as long as he didn't take too foolish of risks, as long as he remembered to use the skills Koshiro had hammered into him, he would be fine.

"Take care of yourself, won't you? And make sure to keep up your basics."

"Yeah..." Zoro nodded. The teen suddenly enveloped Koshiro into a hug that lasted all of two seconds, and he pulled away with his face burning red and muttered, *"Thanks for everything, sensei."*

Koshiro didn't even get a chance to respond as Zoro clamored into the boat and rowed away as if he were in a race, disappearing into the fog. Silently, Koshiro watched Zoro leave, and he hoped that he had least succeeded with Zoro when he had failed so many times before. Time would only tell.

Come back safe, Zoro-kun. was Koshiro's thought.

Turning to the boat captain, Koshiro smiled in his usual manner. *"We should head back now, yes?"*

The boat Captain gave Koshiro a subtle glance as if he were crazy. People avoided this part of the ocean for a reason, because of its dangers and unpredictability. Not to mention that weird fog. Ships were said to disappear for weeks or months if they got too close; even disappearing never to be seen again. And some guy just let a teenager go off by himself into the perilous ocean.

Figuring it was none of his business – besides; this odd guy was paying him, the boat Captain sailed away.

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Present Day

On a small boat somewhere in the East Blue were two figures. One, with pink hair and glasses, the other with raven hair and a straw hat. They had been slowly making their ways towards Shells Town.

Monkey D. Luffy grinned as he casually voiced his desire to ask this Zoro guy about joining his crew after hearing Coby mention him.

A sensation of panicked nerves and fear assaulted him, and Luffy frowned as he turned towards Coby who had a look on his face that rivaled his turbulent emotions. "Wh-what did you say?"

"If Zoro is a good guy, I'm gonna ask him to join my crew!" Luffy said determinedly, and he grinned.

"You can't do that!" Coby just about screeched.

A confused glanced met Coby's outburst. "Eh? Why not?"

"There are hundreds of terrifying rumors about him! He's a devil!" Coby waved his arms to somehow make his point and get Luffy to understand. "Zoro is the oldest of the Roronoa Brothers; and he's able to appear and disappear on a whim! His brothers Gaara and Naruto are equally as terrifying! And there are even rumors of two women who follow them around and lure people into the Brothers' clutches! He's called *Phantom Blade* for a reason, you know!"

"Why's that?"

"Because he's like a ghost!"

"So cool~" Luffy sighed wistfully, trying to imagine what Zoro and his brothers were like. His mind wasn't really on the mysterious women in any way whatsoever.

"No! *Not cool!*" Coby regretted ever mentioning Zoro in such a casual way. It had been nothing more than a passing comment; a tidbit of information he had been aware of due to being on Alvida's ship, and the Pirates talking about how they needed to avoid Shells Town because of Marine presence. Coby felt that he had to curse his luck; of all the things that he and Luffy had talked about; of all the absurd things Luffy needed to ask about for some sort of clarification; the mention of some rumor about Zoro being at Shells Town that Luffy had latched onto.

"Onto Shells Town!" Luffy shouted, easily ignoring the building fear and panic emanating from his companion. What was there to be afraid of?

"He's a Bounty Hunter, Luffy-san! Someone who hunts Pirates! And *you're* a Pirate!" Coby emphasized. He didn't think Luffy asking Zoro to join his crew was even remotely a good idea.

"But I don't even have a bounty yet, what do I have to worry about?" Luffy reasoned with a smile.

Coby continued, panicked nerves and all. "Roronoa Gaara is called *Mad Grin*, and never holds back his ruthlessness! Roronoa Naruto wields various weapons that kill people with ease! They're terrifying to go up against!"

"Ah, so they're strong?"

"That's not what I'm saying *at all!*"

Coby proceeded to tell Luffy the stories he had heard about the Roronoa Brothers; that Zoro was like a ghost and emphasized on some of the stories he had heard; how Naruto wields some sort of chain-scythe weapon that is longer than he is tall; how Gaara somehow uses sand as a weapon and smiles as he takes people's limbs.

But unfortunately for Coby, Luffy thought that everything he was saying about the brothers was cool. The Brothers were insane, and Luffy was dead-set on them joining his crew.

Coby was sure that Luffy would be dead before he even left Shells Town. But a small part of Coby had to wonder; the rumors said that only *Zoro* was being kept there; what about the other two? Had they just abandoned him?

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Slowly, Zoro looked up at the noon sun. He briefly wondered how Koshiro was doing. He had kept his promise to him. It was just a bit longer, and he would finally start on his journey to fulfill his promise to Kuina.

Chapter End Notes

"No man stands so tall as when he stoops to help a child." – Abraham Lincoln

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Listened to sad music as I wrote this, got emotional, and I'm really attached to this version of Koshiro. He's a man whose life has broken down around him more than once, and his motivations involving Kuina were honestly well-meaning. He's seen the worst that Humanity has to offer, and his reasons for discouraging Kuina go beyond "because you're a girl" and he you know, actually shows some emotion when his daughter dies.

There are going to be two interlude chapters at some point, involving Zoro's training at the dojo and what Koshiro's message/Zoro's promise to him entails. I admit, I love those interlude chapters.

Suzi and Yasuhide: people who name the nameless kids who come to them after characters in their favorite fandoms. They're pretty cool people.

Threatening to Break Apart Someone's Family is a Good Way to Make Enemies out of One Monkey D. Luffy, and that's Totally Something You Don't Wanna Do!

Chapter Summary

Luffy and Coby arrive in Shells Town and are quick to notice how odd the residents are acting. They do find Zoro at the Marine Base, but he doesn't want anything to do with them. Upon overhearing Helmeppo's plan to execute Zoro, Luffy is quick to invite Gaara and Naruto along to rescue their brother. Luffy is determined to have Zoro join him, no matter what!

Chapter Notes

Finally, Luffy is here! I've had parts of this chapter planned for so long, and now the time has arrived! Slightly smarter! Luffy, stronger! Luffy, should I say morally gray! Luffy? Luffy also has various changes to his character; and aspects of his childhood have influenced him, which will be explained in various parts later on.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Shells Town was an odd place; the people gave them nervous glances and the town looked rundown. Coby noticed all of these things, but Luffy ignored them – not that he would have noticed how rundown the town looked anyway; at least, not right away. The first thing Luffy *did* notice however, was the uneasiness in the air that his Haki picked up; causing the hairs on the back of his neck to tickle in an unpleasant way.

Sadness, worry, fear, hopelessness... Luffy frowned, not liking the feel of it. Then, he looked around at the town itself... buildings were in need of repairs and paint. If it weren't for the people living there, this place could have easily passed for a ghost town.

So he pushed the thoughts to the back of his mind for now and tried to focus on the positive: his future crew members.

"Okay, Coby! Let's go find Zoro!"

"AAAHHHH!" various townspeople gave a scream when they overheard Luffy.

"Shhh, Luffy-san, not so loud!" Coby admonished, hurriedly pushing Luffy ahead.

"What? Don't talk about Zoro?"

"AAAHHHH!" various other people screamed.

"*Shishishi*," Luffy just laughed. "Well, when we find my crew members, you can ask Captain Morgan to join the Marines!"

"AAAHHHH!" More people screamed.

Coby noticed the oddity – why would these people be screaming about a Marine?

"*Shishishi*," Luffy laughed again. "Roronoa Zoro! Captain Morgan!"

More screaming ensued, and Coby could only sigh at Luffy's antics.

"What an interesting town!" Luffy declared happily.

The two walked through the town until they came to the Marine Base, which was surrounded by a high, stone wall.

"Ah, there it is!" Coby gushed, taking in the sight with shining eyes. "I wonder where they're keeping Zoro, though—"

Coby was cut off by the excited declaration of, "Oi, Coby, there he is!"

Sensing a presence, Luffy had climbed the wall to look into the courtyard.

"AHHH! Luffy-san, what are you doing?!"

Pausing and processing Luffy's words, Coby joined Luffy on the wall.

In the middle of the courtyard, was Zoro tied to a pole. Here, Coby frowned, because he thought that for certain Zoro would be kept inside the Base itself, and not in the courtyard. Whatever Zoro had done, it obviously warranted making a spectacle of the man. Actually...now that he thought about it, it wasn't exactly like a spectacle; more like a trophy.

"Hey..." a voice called out to them, and even though he was perfectly

safe, Coby flinched back. "Come to see the show?"

Luffy grinned, as he was absolutely positive that this guy would be his First Mate.

Coby was still nervous and wanted to leave, so he turned to tell Luffy just that. But the sound of a ladder hitting the wall next to them diverted his attention.

A girl around eight or ten – Coby couldn't be sure – put a finger to her mouth and shushed them. She quickly and easily scaled the wall, ignoring all of Coby's harshly whispered pleading orders to get out of there.

It was annoying to Luffy, as he could feel Coby's worry and fear as if it was pounding around in his skull due to the intensity of it. But there was no fear coming from the girl – happiness and relief, certainly – no reason for Coby to be worried like he was. Luffy's Haki was then hit by worry and fear, from Zoro.

"Why are you here? Where are Naruto and Gaara?"

"They're back with Mama, but I wanted to-"

Zoro tugged against his bindings. "Get out of here, you stupid brat!"

"But, I made you *onigiri*," the girl explained, presenting the aforementioned *onigiri*, which had been carefully wrapped. "I can reach you easily enough, so—"

"Leave, now!" Zoro ordered. "Don't you get it, I'm *not* hungry!"

Coby's worry was now like something trying to claw its way out of Luffy's head; Zoro's worry was easily nearing the same levels as Coby's, and Luffy wished not for the first time he could control the sensory aspect of his Haki.

"My, my...yelling at children, what a vile beast you are, Roronoa Zoro!" another voice chipped in.

Turning to focus on the owner of the new voice, something about the man caused Luffy to frown. Arrogance wafted off of the man, while nervousness and fear followed the two Marines with him. That was when Zoro's panic spiked, causing Luffy to frown even more and furrow his brows in mild concern. This guy didn't look like a threat; much less feel like it. So why?

"Oh, great," Coby was immensely relieved (as was Luffy's Haki). "The Marines will rescue her!" Clearly, Coby wasn't reading the situation for what it was. He'd have to get passed his initial judgements and assumptions if he wanted to be a decent Marine.

"What do you have there?" the man asked, and he grabbed one of the *onigiri* to take a bite out of it.

"Hey!" the girl protested. "I made these for big brother—!"

She was cut off when the man made a face and threw the *onigiri* on the ground, spitting in disgust. He proceeded to knock the other out of her hands and stomped on it with glee. "This is sweet! You stupid girl, the rice is supposed to be salty!"

"Leave her alone, you bastard son!" Zoro demanded, only to be slapped by the man.

"Shut up, Roronoa!"

The hit didn't look like it hurt Zoro, but he was glaring at the man, obviously *pissed*, and his waves of irritation made Luffy's Haki tingle like needles in his skin. The man openly shivered at Zoro's glare, but seemed to think he could get away with anything because Zoro couldn't retaliate.

"I worked really hard on those..." the girl whimpered tearfully.

"You," the man ordered one of the Marines, "throw that little brat over the wall."

"But..." the man said weakly, and he looked down at the girl who met his eyes fearfully. "She's just a kid..."

"Stop, dammit!" Zoro shouted, "Rika! Run, *now!*"

Rika nodded, only to be yanked off of her feet by the man. He glared at the questioning Marine.

"Did you just *question* my orders? Who do you think you are?!" Rika struggled against his grip, which was surprisingly strong. "My daddy is Captain Morgan! So, do as I tell you and throw this brat over that wall!"

The man roughly shoved Rika at the Marine, and he caught her before she fell.

"How else are these stupid commoners going to know not to question mine and daddy's orders?!" his voice turned into a near-screech. "Get to it!"

The Marine picked up Rika, and whispered, "Sorry about this girl...try to tuck and roll before you hit the ground, okay?"

With that, he tossed her over the wall.

For the two teens who had been observing the scene, Luffy was thoroughly annoyed by the bowl-cut man, and as for Coby...well, Coby was horrified. Marines weren't supposed to hurt people; they were supposed to *protect* them!

When Rika came flying over the wall, Luffy moved to catch her, but he was beaten to it when a large hand made of sand caught her instead.

"Rika-chan, are you alright?" a blond boy was asking.

Rika just nodded silently, eyes downcast.

A redheaded boy who was controlling the sand didn't look happy as he gently placed her on the ground and all of his sand went into a gourd that was strapped to his back. "We told you not to come here without us; that we were taking care of Zoro-nii. You could have broken your neck and couldn't move and bled out."

At Rika's fearful look, the blond whacked the redhead's shoulder and scowled at him.

Rika looked guilty. "I'm sorry, I just wanted to help..."

Glaring at the wall, the blond pulled the redhead and Rika with him. "Let's go...we only have ten days left."

Luffy stared after them, with stars in his eyes, but he was wondering why the two boys felt *off*. If he didn't know any better, he'd say that there were *four* people; not two. But the invisible two felt like...he couldn't exactly place his finger on it, and he failed to explain it to himself in a way that made sense. Thinking about it was somewhat headache-inducing.

But, he'd dwell on it later.

Turning his attention back to the scene playing out in the courtyard,

the bowl-cut guy smirked and shrugged as he talked. "...you sure are stubborn to have survived for this long. Well, unfortunately – because of that little display and all, I'm afraid I'm going to have to extend your stay by another two weeks."

The bowl-cut guy didn't seem the least bit sorry as he gloated in his power-trip.

"But you said-!" Zoro started angrily before he took a deep breath and smirked. "Fine, if that's how you're gonna be."

Zoro knew his brothers wouldn't be happy; and it would take quite a bit of convincing for the Biju to not want to storm through the Base and rip the bastard son's head from his shoulders and keep it as a trophy. That really would be far too troublesome.

Helmeppo sneered, thoroughly pleased with himself, and walked away, calling, "Enjoy it while you can!"

"Oh, they're gone..." Coby said, once the man and the Marines were gone. Relieved and rightly angry, he started, "Luffy, can you believe that g—*LUFFY!*"

Luffy was standing across from Zoro with no shame.

"They say you're a bad guy." Luffy stated.

Zoro just snorted, and shifted somewhat. Not that he could shift his position by much. "Heh, still here, huh?"

"They left you out here to be publically humiliated," Luffy said, observing that there was a strong sense of pride and determination; and no humiliation whatsoever radiated off of Zoro. There was something oddly familiar about him, but Luffy couldn't place it. But, he couldn't think about the how's and why's of it right now.

He'd dwell on that fact later, too. It would probably make things easier when Zoro joined him by then. Then, he could ask him.

Anyway.

He had to ask the question, "Are you actually strong?"

"Mind your own business!" Zoro shot back. Why was this guy here?!

Luffy walked closer and took one look at the ropes. He couldn't help but tease ever so slightly, "Those ropes don't look like much. I

would've escaped in three days."

Zoro snorted again. "Yeah? I could escape these anytime I wanted." Well, maybe when this whole thing had first started, but he was low on energy. He knew he was running on fumes, but he didn't care. "I've got more willpower than you," smirking, he added, "I'm gonna survive this! Don't you forget it!"

"Ah, well...suit yourself." Luffy said as he turned to walk away.

"Wait a sec," Zoro said, indicating with a nod of his head. "Would you get me that?"

Luffy looked down at the ruined remains of the *onigiri*. "Eh...they're all dirty now..."

"Just give 'em here!" Zoro ordered, and Luffy gave him the requested food.

It tasted like dirt mixed with sugar, but right now, it was the most delicious thing he had eaten. It would probably suffice long enough.

"Thanks..." Zoro muttered. "That girl, Rika...she lives above the restaurant in town with her mom...if you see her, tell her 'thanks for the food' for me, will ya?"

Hopefully, this kid would head over there. Zoro knew that Rika was alright, thanks to his brothers; he had heard his brothers talking, but hadn't heard what they said. If this kid were to pass on his message, it would let his brothers know that he was alright. Well, as alright as he could be.

At the prospect of food, Luffy nodded. "I'll be back later, okay!"

Zoro just rolled his eyes.

Easily jumping over the wall, Luffy joined Coby.

"I wonder who those two guys were..." Coby muttered to himself. They both had seemed dangerous; yet they had helped that little girl... perhaps they were Zoro's brothers? From what Coby had heard of in rumors, one of them could control sand – but that guy had been so gentle with the girl when he was supposed to be a monster...

"Let's go eat, I'm hungry." Luffy stated, interrupting Coby's musing and headed off in a random direction.

The two almost wandered around without direction, but it was Coby who took the initiative to ask for directions to the restaurant – which was the only one in town – and they made their way there.

Upon entering the small establishment, they overheard a portion of a conversation between Rika and her mother, and the two boys who had been outside the Base.

"—told you not to go down there!" a woman was saying with a raised voice.

"But mom, it's our fault he's there!"

"I told you, Rika-chan, leave Zoro-nii to us, we can sneak around much easier than you can!" the blond was saying.

The redhead added, "Zoro-nii knows what he's doing; he's strong, he'll survive this."

"Rika, I mean it: you need to *stay away* from the Base. Look what almost happened; what if Gaara hadn't been there?!"

"But..." Rika looked close to tears.

"Um, excuse me..." Coby said, feeling awkward.

The woman quickly straightened up and gave them a warm yet strained smile as if that conversation hadn't been going on. "Oh! Welcome. I'm Ririka, please sit anywhere you like."

"I'm Monkey D. Luffy!" Luffy said with a grin.

Coby nodded his head. "Coby... nice to meet you."

Save for the six people standing there, there was no-one else in the restaurant so Luffy and Coby had their choice of seats. They sat down at a table, and Rika quickly brought them glasses of water. Coby frowned when he saw a dark bruise already forming on her arm where that man had grabbed her.

Ririka headed into the open kitchen, and went to work preparing a simple meal.

"Eh, you're Rika, right?" Luffy asked, and the girl nodded shyly. "Zoro said to tell you 'thanks for the food!'"

Both Gaara and Naruto's attention shot over to where Luffy and Coby

were sitting.

"Um, can I ask," Coby started, wondering if this was even an appropriate question. "Why is Zoro-san tied up in the courtyard like that?"

"It's all thanks to that stupid Captain Morgan's son!" Rika nearly shouted. "Zoro-nii and his brothers were just passing through town when Helmeppo's wolf attacked me." Rika held up her left leg which had a thick, slightly dirty, white bandage on her calf, "Zoro-nii cut it up, slash, slash, slash!" Rika mimicked holding a sword and waved her hand around, "Just like that! And he was *so cool* when he did it, too! But then, the son blamed momma and me..." her excitement fizzled out. "He said that he'd hold momma responsible for the death of his pet because it was rare and expensive. She'd get arrested and I'd be shipped off to the orphanage, along with his brothers. Or they'd be arrested... That, or Zoro would have to survive without food or water for three weeks..." her gaze went over to Gaara and Naruto. "Gaara-nii and Naruto-nii have been waiting here..."

"You mean...he didn't do anything wrong? Isn't he a bad guy?" Coby asked, and he flinched when Gaara's attention was suddenly on him.

"Zoro-nii wouldn't do anything to anyone who didn't deserve it." Gaara just about growled, and Naruto quickly put a hand on his brother's shoulder to calm him, though he also glared at Coby.

"Don't talk about things you don't know, dumbass, 'ttebayo."

Coby didn't know that that repressive feeling was, but was extremely thankful that the redhead's attention was off of him. But still, Coby apologized. "I'm sorry, it's just that I assumed..." Coby's fists clenched. "I want to be a Marine, but..." Coby looked properly angry as he shouted, "Marines are supposed to be the Justice of the Seas! Why is Captain Morgan allowed to get away with this?!"

Luffy on the other hand frowned in confusion. He could feel exhaustion, frustration, anger, and fear radiating off of the two younger brothers, yet...it felt as if their emotions were mixed, somehow; like not all of those emotions were theirs, or something... *definitely* like two more invisible Mystery People were there, too. Maybe his Haki was acting up? That didn't make sense; his Haki was usually pretty accurate. Especially when he truly focused.

Again, something he'd dwell on later. If these guys were Zoro's brothers, then he could find out about the Mystery People that hung

around them.

Ririka came out with some rice and meat and placed it on their table. Upon hearing the last bit of Coby's question, she shook her head sadly. "Shells Town is far too small for anyone to bother with. Apparently, Captain Morgan stopped some notorious Pirate years ago, and now he believes he's worthy of unending praise and us lesser folk should be thankful to bow down and live under his thumb."

"That's horrible..." Coby said sadly.

"Mm-hmm." Luffy agreed around a mouthful of food.

The pink-haired teen stared at his food, dejectedly. For just about the entirety of his life, he had admired the Marines. They were so cool; they were the Justice that protected the innocent people from tyrants. But... a tyrant Marine who allowed the public humiliation and torture of a man who had done the right thing? Allowing a child to be attacked and holding the child's family responsible for defending themselves? From the state of the town, Captain Morgan had been doing much more than that.

What was his dream, then? Was it to join people who took advantage of others? Coby gripped his fork tightly and shoved food into his mouth as he chewed with unnecessary ferocity. No! He would join the Marines and be a man whole truly upheld Justice! He would be a Marine that took down men like Morgan; Marine or not!

At least... he'd like to be.

At that moment, Helmeppo sauntered into the restaurant followed by the two Marines who had been flanking him earlier in the courtyard and plopped down at a table. "Waitress!" he snapped his fingers at Ririka who scowled. "Bring me some food and a bottle of wine... *on the house!*"

"We can barely afford that, much less for free." Ririka muttered bitterly under her breath. Considering that this was the man who not only had owned the wolf that attacked her daughter; threatened Ririka and Rika; but also had the little girl thrown over a wall, poisoning his food sounded appealing.

Gaara and Naruto both glared at the man, who hadn't seen them sitting a few tables away.

"You *do* remember who my daddy is, right?" Helmeppo questioned

conceitedly when Ririka didn't move fast enough for his liking. "I'll have this shit-hole burned to the ground if I want! I ask him to do *anything* and he does it for me!"

Ririka stalked off to the kitchen to prepare Helmeppo's meal, while Rika silently set a wine glass and a bottle of ale onto his table and went to sit and pout at Gaara and Naruto's table.

Helmeppo however, felt as if this was the perfect opportunity to brag about his plans. Annoying haughtiness wafted off of him. "I told that fool Zoro he would have to stay here another two weeks on top of the ten days he has left!" Mocking laughter followed, while both Naruto and Gaara stiffened and glared kunai at him. "He actually thinks he can hold out for that long! Too bad I'm gonna have him executed tomorrow!"

Gaara was ready to crush Helmeppo piece-by-piece, while Naruto would have used his eyes as pin-cushions. But neither boy was prepared for Luffy to run across the room and punch Helmeppo in the face. Helmeppo went flying backwards and slammed into the wooden wall, actually denting it to some extent. Helmeppo moaned as his world spun, and his mouth tasted coppery. Something in his mouth felt weird, and a few seconds later, he was spitting two teeth into his hand and he was sure that others were loose.

Helmeppo just about screamed at the sight of the blood, but his anger was directed to the one who had the nerve to punch him. "You idiot! Don't you know who my da—*EEEEK!*"

Helmeppo screamed when Luffy lifted him up by his collar and slammed him into the wall again, hard enough that the man saw stars.

Ririka could see everything from where she was, and she stopped what she was doing and stared. Never mind the food she was cooking. Honestly, a small part of her began to worry at Luffy's assault of Helmeppo. He could easily send a team of Marines to trash her restaurant; or arrest her. Maybe both.

"YOU BASTARD!" Luffy shouted, his dark eyes furious. Helmeppo just may have wet his pants due to this situation, and his Marine guards just stared; shocked at the aggressive display. No-one had ever dared attack the Captain or his son so brazenly before. "HE'S THEIR *OLDER BROTHER!*"

Helmeppo finally noticed the two boys for the first time since entering the restaurant and he paled even further and his eyes bugged out of

his head. Now that his attention had been called to them, both lost the shocked look on their faces and now looked ready and very willing to kill him – very, very slowly.

"I-I-!" Helmeppo pathetically stuttered, and Luffy slammed him up against the wall one more time for good measure before letting him slide to the floor and turning around in a fury. "NARUTO! GAARA!"

Seeing that Luffy was no longer manhandling him, Helmeppo fled to go tell his daddy that there were people who had attacked him! And while he was at it, the Marines who had been there and did nothing to help should be fired and then arrested! But his father would certainly and unquestionably kill them – they totally deserved it for not protecting him!

The Marines glanced over to where Luffy was, then over to the exit, then at each other, before fleeing themselves. Both were wondering if it was better to return to the Base or hide from Captain Morgan's wrath.

Meanwhile, back in the restaurant, the way Luffy spoke caused both boys to look to him, and the teen had a certain commanding presence about him that demanded their full attention.

"Come with me right now; we're going to get your brother and you guys are joining my crew!"

"What crew?" Naruto asked.

"My Pirate crew, of course. I'm gonna be the Pirate King!"

"Why are we joining your crew?" Gaara questioned, even as he got up and grabbed his gourd.

"Because I need strong *nakama*, and I *know* you guys are the perfect choice to sail with the future Pirate King." Luffy said with absolute confidence.

Naruto looked up at Luffy with a hopeful smile. They hadn't had the best experience with Pirates in the past, but...this one was offering to help, so...it would be alright, wouldn't it?

"Luffy-san? What are you doing?" Coby asked, also following after him. Against his better judgement if the pink-haired boy were being honest with himself. But he didn't want to sit around doing nothing.

Luffy continued marching, with the two boys on his tail. He wasn't aware of the looks of admiration the both of them were sending him, but he could feel their hope, happiness, and relief. "Making Zoro and his brothers my *nakama* and setting out to sea!"

Ririka watched the four of them leave, feeling slightly nervous. What was about to happen? But she dared to hope – that maybe Captain Morgan's reign of terror would come to an end. How ironically funny it was; putting hope in a Pirate to end a tyrannical Marine.

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Meanwhile, back at the Base:

Just moments after Helmeppo had left, Zoro took a deep breath and concentrated. He wiggled his arms slightly, and pushed himself up with his feet. It was painful, after not moving for so long; but Zoro powered through. He was able to move his arms, to some extent, but not much. There was some slight give to the ropes – not nearly enough for him to pull himself free, but maybe enough so that he could move. On the bright side, the Marines hadn't thought to tie his legs. In all honesty – Zoro had to admit to himself – if he hadn't had his brothers with him, he more than happily – well, *willingly* was probably a better word for it – he would have challenged himself to wait out those two additional weeks. He would have taken that bastard son's shit just to prove that he could do it.

Perhaps if he hadn't spent any time amongst the likes of Shinobi, he would have held onto his pride and honor as a test of his resolve. But Shinobi always twisted things around so that the terms and conditions worked in their favor. So, Zoro reasoned that Helmeppo didn't hold onto his end of the bargain. Plus, it wasn't like the bastard son was a swordsman – so there was no honor to be lost there, and no promise had been made on Wado Ichimonji.

The bastard son had promised no harm would come to Rika – that was out because he had her thrown over the wall. He may not have done it himself, but he had manhandled her and ordered the action to be done. Helmeppo had said one month, but then out of nowhere added two additional weeks when only ten days were left. If Helmeppo wasn't going to hold to his end of the bargain, Zoro didn't have to either.

Zoro shifted slightly, and smirked when he felt some more give to the ropes, and he could move forward just a quarter of an inch. That was

all he needed.

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Now arriving at the Base, Luffy unabashedly jumped over the wall and stood before Zoro...

...

"What? He's gone?"

Coby ran forward and inspected the ropes. He looked at the ropes both confused and worried. "They couldn't have already taken him to be executed... why would they re-tie the ropes like this?"

Naruto grinned. "Zoro-nii escaped!"

"Escaped?" Coby asked skeptically. "Without *untying* the ropes?"

Naruto nodded happily, and didn't bother explaining anything to the pink-haired teen.

"His scent just cuts off..." Gaara muttered, as he sniffed the air, searching for any sign of his brother.

Luffy put a hand on his hat and glanced around the Base, scanning everything with his Haki. There was an inflection of familiar energy, and Luffy grinned as he sensed Zoro inside the Base. While he could tell where Zoro's general location was, he couldn't pinpoint it exactly – not yet.

"He's inside the Base!" Luffy announced.

"What? Why would he be in there?" Coby wondered. Logically, if someone were going to escape, they'd want to get as far from their captors as possible. But Zoro had apparently gone *further* into enemy territory. "How do you know that, Luffy-san?"

"Mystery Power! Yosh! Let's go!" Luffy shouted, and took off... in the complete opposite direction of the Base. Naruto was already cursing his luck at Luffy's poor directional sense. Hopefully, he wouldn't be as bad as Zoro. Running after the teen and grabbing the back of Luffy's shirt to get his attention, he said, "Luffy! Stop! Wait, the Base is *that* way!"

There was a grin on Luffy's face as he looked down at the blond, not slowing down once as his arms stretched out at impossible lengths

(slightly surprising the younger Roronoa brothers) to grab the pole that Zoro had formerly been tied to. "I know! Everyone! Grab on!"

Holding onto Luffy and wondering what exactly he had planned; Coby was in the unique position of being more prepared than most at seeing Luffy stretch to unnatural lengths, but he wasn't prepared for all four of them to go rocketing towards the Base at a high speed that no normal person would ever want to find themselves in unprepared. The question of why they couldn't have just walked the 40-50 feet was lost to Coby as they sped towards a building. Unexpectedly for Luffy and Coby, Gaara's sand acted as a shield that prevented them from face-planting painfully into the side of the aforementioned building.

Naruto looked thrilled. "That was fun, 'ttebayo!"

Luffy grinned with pride and excitement. "I *know*, right? No-one else seems to enjoy that, for some reason."

Coby gawked at the gaping hole in the wall with cracks that spider-webbed out, which would definitely need to be repaired within the following days. Luffy was now staring wide-eyed at Gaara, and he shifted uncomfortably under Luffy's intense gaze.

There were literal stars in Luffy's eyes as he exclaimed, "That is so cool!"

"That sand really is useful!" Coby couldn't help but agree, as he was relieved that they hadn't been injured. "How does it work?"

Gaara replied very seriously, "I had a Sand-Demon Sealed into me when I was born."

Coby just blinked incredulously at Gaara. "R-right. Okay..."

Clearly, Gaara wasn't going to tell him how he could control sand. Within Gaara's mindscape, Ichibi laughed at the boy's perplexed look.

"Ohhh..." Luffy only nodded. "Guess that explains that."

Maybe that explained why he felt two presences with Gaara. Did Naruto have a Sand-Demon or something similar too?

"No it doesn't..." Coby muttered, shaking his head. "Anyway, we made a lot of noise with that landing." Looking around, he appeared to be worried. "Where are all the guards?"

Glancing upwards towards the roof, Luffy frowned as he focused. "That's weird, there's a bunch of people up there. There must be a party! Let's go, Naruto!"

Naruto drew his short sword and nodded, and started running up the side of the building.

Luffy gaped in wide-eyed wonderment at Naruto. "You're like a Ninja!"

Naruto paused briefly, standing horizontally on the side of the building. Puffing his chest out with pride, Naruto smirked, "That's 'cuz I *am* one, 'ttebayou!"

"Wow... I have an actual *Ninja* on my crew!" Luffy's eyes sparkled even more (the others didn't think that was possible) for a moment before he turned to the other two. "Gaara, Coby -let's split up and look for Zoro!"

"Alright."

Luffy then stretched his arms up to reach something on the roof, and shot up and out of sight.

Coby's jaw dropped at the gravity-defying feat Naruto had displayed, and he was starting to wonder exactly who the Roronoa brothers were – one apparently could escape without untying anything; another could control that sand; the other was running up the side of a perfectly vertical building...it was all too much! Plus, there was Luffy. He was seriously feeling out of his depth.

"Wait, we need a plan!" Coby realized. "We don't even know when or where we're supposed to meet the others!"

Gaara just gave Coby an impassive glance and simply stepped through the hole his sand-shield had made and started walking in a random direction to look for Zoro. "It'll work out."

Coby was shaking his head again, and he followed after Gaara.

"So did you eat a Devil Fruit too?"

Gaara made a face. "I couldn't eat something like that."

"Oh, okay..." Coby replied. Not everyone wanted to eat a thing like a Devil Fruit, he guessed. So how did that explain his sand?

They walked in silence, which was awkward only for Coby.

On top of the Base, stood Captain Axe-Hand Morgan; an imposing man with an iron jaw. He observed as the pathetic Marines who served under him struggled with his honorary statue. The disrespectful idiots that they were, they nearly damaged it, but the scratches luckily for them, weren't evident.

He was also going over his list of other problems; such as the townsfolk's donations to him were decreasing.

The Marine he was making this observation to nervously spoke up, "Well...um, Sir...maybe that's because they're ...poor? From...from being, well, overtaxed?"

At the mention of such a ludicrous claim, Morgan turned on the Marine. "Nonsense! It's clearly a sign of disrespect to me!"

Not wanting to get cut in half or even have such an injury inflicted at all, the Marine quickly agreed, "Yes, Sir! Of course, Sir!" he then began adding everything he could think of to appease Morgan. "I'm sorry for my stupid observation! Clearly, they're disrespecting you!"

With the commentary going on around them, the Marines trying to hold onto the ridiculously-sized statue that in all honesty, needed something much bigger and stronger than around 45 or so Marines to lift. Plus, the space available was far too small for the sort of leverage that they actually needed to lift and properly place the statue. All of them were suffering from serious rope burns as well, trying to hold the thing steady.

Morgan gave an irritated glance over to Helmeppo who burst out onto the roof right then, with an already swelling cheek. "Daddy! There's someone I want you to kill!"

"Hmm?"

"There's some bastard who hit me!" Helmeppo continued, on the verge of whining. "So go kill him already!"

Morgan liked to think of himself as a man who was longsuffering, for having put up with his son's annoying behavior for so long. His impatience and irritation won out, and Morgan struck Helmeppo with the blunt side of his axe, sending him flying several feet back.

Helmeppo wheezed as the wind was knocked out of him, and he

wondered just what the heck was going on.

"Helmeppo..." Morgan growled. "You do not have the right to give me an order."

Helmeppo shakily sat up, looking at his father in an uncertain light. What was going on? His father hadn't *ever* hit him before!

"Another thing...I've heard rumors of people sneaking onto this base for the past few weeks...the most recent one being that of a little girl earlier today. Did you kill her?"

"What? No..." Helmeppo shook his head, because even though he flaunted his money and power, he still had a small shred of decency. "She was a little girl..."

"Her audacity to sneak onto this Base is an affront to *me!*" Morgan bellowed.

That caused the men who were lifting the statue to lose their focus, and the statue slammed against a portion of the roof's entrance.

"Fools!" Morgan was shouting more, and getting louder. "Which one of you *dares* to disrespect me by damaging my statue?!"

Morgan picked a random Marine and raised his axe-hand, and the Marine recoiled, begging for his life.

At that moment, Luffy shot up passed the roof, and quickly grabbed the ropes holding the statue so he wouldn't fly too high. The Marines struggled with the sudden added weight, and then Naruto came up seconds later.

Naruto's eyes zeroed in on Helmeppo, whose own eyes widened at the death glare.

"**YOU!**" Naruto shouted, and with a flying leap, he used the statue as a springboard to charge at Helmeppo. The Marines and Morgan all could only watch helplessly as the men holding onto the ropes had no choice but to let go, and the statue slammed against a portion of the roof and broke in half.

Morgan turned red in his fury. "YOU BOTH WILL BE EXECUTED! MEN EXECUTE THEM!"

Naruto snatched Helmeppo by his collar, while Luffy praised, "Wow,

that was amazing! I'm gonna have the *best* Pirate crew *ever!*"

The two unwelcome visitors booked it towards the door, with Helmeppo in tow, screaming, "This is the guy who I wanted you to kill!"

The door slammed shut, and the Marines gave chase after recovering from their shock just seconds later, only to find that the door wouldn't open.

"Break down that door and kill those two, you fools!" Morgan bellowed, not really caring that his son was held hostage. What mattered was the fact that these people had disrespected *him*, *Captain Morgan!*

"It's stuck!"

"MOVE!" Morgan cut down the door, only to have a burst of smoke envelope everyone there. Their eyes watered and they started coughing. Morgan ignored the men who were suffering the same as he was, and ordered them to find the people who had disrespected him.

"Obviously, this means the town is trying to commit a rebellion!" Morgan was sure of it. He started making a mental list of the most likely candidates for execution so that the townsfolk would keep in line.

The Marines all ran into the building, only to find themselves slipping and sliding down the stairs, slamming into each other and the walls as they went.

Several voices exclaimed, "OW!" as the unfortunate Marines to land on the floor first had landed on several caltrops that had been spread out several feet at the base of the stairs and continued a good five more feet in front of them.

They all coughed and groaned and pushed themselves up, feeling miserable. Ignoring their cuts, bruises and teary eyes, they searched for the perpetrators, and only slipped every now and then.

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Within the Marine recruits' lodgings, Zoro walked out of the showers, feeling clean and relieved to have new clothing – used, but new to him. Fortunately, there had been a Marine or two that matched Zoro's size and had clothing that was something other than a military

uniform. He still kept his shoes, bandana, and haramaki, but black pants and a dark gray shirt with two blue stripes going down the sides and arms with the number 02 on the back now belonged to him. He also felt extremely thankful that he had found a new, unopened package of boxers that were his size.

The men here also had a few snacks hidden away, and Zoro had unwittingly found them when he had been looking for clothing earlier. Zoro was not one to be picky right now, and he ate a few of those as well.

He was quickly finishing off another snack of chips before going to find his swords when the door burst open. Several Marines stood there, blinking owlishly at Zoro, whose cheeks were full. Zoro swallowed, then dropped the now-empty package to the floor. His glare was unmatched.

"Where the hell are my swords?"

"He's eating our food!" one man shouted.

"He's wearing my shirt!" another cried.

"Get him!"

Zoro sighed when he realized he would have to beat the information out of these guys.

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Naruto and Luffy ran quickly through the Base, and considering that Helmeppo was much taller than Naruto, he was getting bumped and dragged with every step. The seams on one of the shoulders of his jacket had come undone, and he had lost a shoe. Helmeppo lamented that he was going to have such severe carpet burn after this ordeal. The man was also pretty sure that he had lost a few more teeth somewhere earlier.

"We need to find Zoro-nii's swords!" Naruto said, glaring, his eyes a surreal purple color, with his pupils almost slit-like. "Tell me where they are, 'ttebayou!"

Helmeppo recoiled at the unnaturalness of the boy's gaze, and he had to wonder why neither of his kidnappers had thought to ask him that much earlier. He managed to whimper out, "In my...in my room..."

"Where's your room?" Luffy questioned.

"Back that way..." was the pained response.

They skidded to a stop, and Luffy whacked Helmeppo on the head.
"Why didn't you say that earlier?!"

"You *didn't ask* me!" Helmeppo shot back.

"There they are! Stop or we'll shoot!"

Everyone turned around to see 15 Marines with guns pointed at them.

"*AHH!* Shoot them!" Helmeppo screeched.

Luffy grabbed Helmeppo, and quickly positioned him as a Human shield. "Do it."

Helmeppo was now screeching, "*AHHH!* Don't shoot!"

Naruto glared at the Marines, and then said, "Luffy! Can you get Zoro-nii's swords? I'll take care of these idiots, 'ttebayo!"

Luffy blinked at Naruto, feeling the confidence the boy had before grinning. "Right! See you later!"

The teen ran off with a screaming and protesting Helmeppo. The Marines attempted to give chase towards Luffy, as killing him was their priority, but Naruto swung his kusarigama in front of them, cutting off the bills of their hats. The men who had been in the front felt the wind go by their faces and heard the clear ring of sharp steel, and they quickly realized how close they had come to getting cut. Their attention uneasily went towards Naruto, who was smirking.

"Now, we're gonna have some fun, 'ttebayo."

The smirk seemed dangerous, and Naruto's tone of voice indicated that he was very likely going to kill them. Naruto made a hand sign, and transformed into a beautiful, and very naked blonde female surrounded by strategically placed pink smoke.

Giving the men a seductive wink, Naruko asked, "Do you big boys wanna play with me~?"

The men gaped, and when Naruko blew them a kiss and giggled, all of them rocketed backwards, blood spurting from their noses.

In another poof of smoke, Naruto was himself again, and he cackled as he ran off after Luffy.

Moments later, more Marines came upon their fallen comrades. All they noticed were the bodies; the blood; and the stupid grins on the men's faces.

"Those monsters! What did they *do?!'*" one questioned, crying tears for his fallen brethren.

"Thank goodness, they're still alive!" another said, relieved.

"*So beautiful...*" one of the fallen men moaned.

The ones who hadn't been around to witness Naruto's transformation wondered what exactly had happened. The men *looked* injured, yet had no obvious injuries and were blissfully happy. They couldn't stay with their fallen comrades though; as it didn't seem to be an emergency, and they ran to try and find the two who had broken into the Base, and Helmeppo.

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Over with Gaara and Coby, they had made their way through the main building, and Gaara walked with a stoic expression and his arms crossed, while Coby followed close behind, not really sure what he could do, if anything, if they ran into trouble.

Coby took the chance to study Gaara at this point – the younger boy was clearly eccentric. Oversized purple scarf, black baggy shirt, baggy burgundy pants, barefoot, and the gourd had various intricate patterns traced on it. Along with some sort of pointed white thing (which Coby was fairly certain was bone) that had carvings on it and was a bit too large to be a tooth; and a seashell that was attached to the gourd with thick twine. There were also other small knickknacks, but Coby couldn't be sure what they were. But one of those decorations definitely consisted of Human teeth.

Coby shuddered.

"We have to be careful, Gaara-kun..." Coby warned, not liking the fear that was evident in his voice.

Gaara glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "You smell like you're going to piss your pants. Maybe you should have stayed back at the restaurant."

"I...I *am* scared..." Coby shakily admitted. "But...if I want to be a Marine, I'm going to have to do pretty dangerous things...and I can't let someone like you go by yourself."

"...I've handled things on my own plenty of times." Gaara replied skeptically. He took in the form of the boy next to him: shoulders hunched, completely oblivious to his surroundings, was hesitant, and was altogether unprepared to take on an enemy. "You may only be a year or two older than me, but I can tell I have far more combat experience."

"A year or two...?" Coby frowned. "Wait, *how old* do you think I am?"

Gaara cocked his head, reminding Coby of an inquisitive raccoon. "Thirteen, maybe fifteen."

The older boy's face dropped, and a dark cloud hung over Coby as he responded despondently, "I'm actually eighteen, Gaara-kun...I'll be nineteen next month."

In his surprise, Gaara actually tripped and now stared wide-eyed at Coby before his expression went back to being neutral. "Oh. That's kind of sad."

Coby would have asked what Gaara meant by that because he was fairly certain that was an insult when an explosion – or rather – a wall several doors down was suddenly blown away by a gust of wind followed by screaming Marines.

"Zoro-nii!" Gaara ran *towards* the danger, and Coby hesitantly followed after.

They came upon a scene of destruction and pandemonium. Zoro had three swords, and he had clearly just fought off all of those Marines somehow. Coby honestly wasn't sure how he had managed such a feat; but Zoro was obviously worn down from exerting himself.

"Zoro-nii!" Gaara called out again, and slammed into Zoro, wrapping his arms around his brother in a tight hug.

Coby stood in what remained of the doorway as he took in the sight, honestly feeling happy for the little reunion.

"Sorry for worrying you, sand-brat." Zoro said, ruffling Gaara's hair.

Gaara looked immensely relieved, and for the first time upon meeting

them, Coby noticed the way Gaara relaxed and he no longer had the stern look about him. In fact, Coby wouldn't have been so off-put about Gaara if the younger boy had looked like *this*, instead of that intense gaze. The teen also noticed how Zoro's facial features softened briefly in that small moment; how Gaara had a small smile – and Coby wondered if the brothers were really as terrifying as the rumors said they were.

"It's good to see you're alright, Zoro-san." Coby said with a smile as he approached the two.

Loud movement from the opposite end of the bunkroom drew their attention, and Coby squeaked, while Zoro sighed and Gaara glared. Numerous Marines were there, with guns drawn.

"READY! AIM! FIRE!"

Coby was prepared to run, even though it didn't look like he could get behind efficient cover in time; but Zoro suddenly grabbed him, not allowing him to escape.

"Don't move." Zoro was far too calm for Coby's liking, and he recanted his earlier statement. Both Zoro and Gaara were insane, and they wanted him to die right alongside them!

Coby pointed out the obvious. "They have guns!"

Sure enough, the Marines fired, but a wall of sand appeared in front of them, and Coby just gawked open-mouthed at the amount of sand the redhead had been carrying. Sure, he had seen the hand and that shield earlier, but that had been a small preview. That begged the question of exactly how strong Gaara was.

"Wow..." Coby whispered. He had only heard stories of such incredible feats, and to be seeing one in front of him... maybe it helped that right now that feat had saved his life a second time. "That shield is amazing, Gaara-kun!"

Gaara glanced back at Coby out of the corner of his eye. Not many people who were strangers complimented the use of his sand. He was undoubtedly flattered, but wasn't sure how to respond.

"Yes, it is. Getting shot would be inconvenient. I don't think anyone wants unnecessary holes in their bodies."

More Marines began pouring into the room, and that was when they

noticed Captain Morgan was behind them. These particular Marines looked bruised, battered, and not pleased.

"How can you *not* have taken care of them?!" Morgan bellowed. He then stopped and took in the sight of *three* other people who were daring to oppose him! This was an absolute uprising in his opinion, and undoubtedly proved that the town was going against him.

"Well, see..." one man started nervously, "they've got weird abilities..."

"EXCUSES!" Morgan bellowed, cutting the Marine down. "If you can't handle these criminals, then *I* will! Anyone who can't handle something as simple as these fools should just go kill themselves so I don't have to deal with your incompetence!"

Gaara growled at Morgan, and Zoro took a stance with his filched swords. Zoro suddenly faded out and appeared before Morgan, causing everyone who witnessed it to do a double-take. Zoro grinned maliciously as he slashed out at Morgan, and Morgan barely just managed to recover from his shock to not get cut.

Gaara stood stationary, because these people weren't worth the effort of the movement he normally employed when fighting. Manipulating his sand to tear through the building, he knocked several oncoming Marines off of their feet, and even threw bedframes and chests at the men. The Marines quickly moved to dodge their furniture, and they didn't like the intense, murderous look that Gaara had. At least Gaara was only knocking them out and many of them likely had broken bones and would be in a world of pain once they woke up.

Morgan didn't really have any attacks beyond swinging his axe-hand at his opponent and using his weight and strength against them. Morgan wasn't particularly fast, either. But Zoro could tell that he was slowing down due to both exhaustion and starvation, and Morgan was overpowering him. His vision momentarily swam, and he stumbled – but he recovered quickly enough that he blocked an attack.

But Morgan had seen the slip, and he grinned haughtily at Zoro. "THIS IS WHERE YOU DIE TODAY, RORONOA!"

Morgan slammed his axe down, and Zoro quickly crossed all three of his swords as a shield against the attack. Zoro's eyes widened when he heard a crack. Oh, shit. These swords, while well-made, weren't the best quality. The sword in his right hand broke first, followed mere seconds later by the one in his left. Zoro needed to move *now* but the world started to fade, and not because he was using his Kekkei

Genkai.

An exuberant shout sounded above them, and Luffy shot into Morgan just as the sword that was in Zoro's mouth snapped, and his shoulder was just mere seconds away from being cut. Luffy performed a twisting motion where one foot collided with Morgan's face and with the momentum, Morgan was knocked to the floor. At that moment, his other foot slammed Morgan's axe-arm into the floor cracking the floor and breaking his titular arm. Morgan screamed and cursed as Luffy grinned at Zoro, who was just barely staying awake.

Casually turning his attention away from Morgan, Luffy impossibly grinned even wider.

"Ohh, you mystery-escaped; that's great!"

"Of course I did. Told you I could get out anytime I wanted." Zoro forced himself to stand. "Alright, kid, give me my swords."

Luffy held out Zoro's swords, but then quickly pulled away when he reached for them. Knowing that Zoro was clearly worn down; and not in any real condition to fight for much longer, Luffy's grin turned mischievous, "I saved your life just now, you owe me! Plus, if we fight together, everyone'll think we're *nakama* anyway. Being killed by Marines or coming with me..." Luffy held out the three swords once more. "What'll it be?"

This was truly exciting, Luffy had to admit – he was seeing just small previews of what his *nakama* could do.

Realizing the exact same thing that Luffy had, Zoro smirked, and took his swords. "You're the son of the devil, you know that? Fine!" he drew his swords. "I'd rather be a Pirate than let any of us die here!"

"I guess I'll call you Captain, then." Gaara said, as sand shot up around them when people fired their guns at them.

Naruto held up his own sword. "I'll fight with everything I've got, 'ttebayo!"

"Yahoo!" Luffy cheered excitedly. "You guys are my *nakama*!"

"I guess that makes me a criminal now, opposing and attacking Marines." Zoro said as he glared dangerously at Luffy – one that said that not even his weakened state would stop him, "I'll tell you one thing; I'll always follow my own ambitions!"

"Ambitions?" Luffy asked, cocking his head.

"To become the World's greatest Swordsman!" Zoro declared. "If you do anything that gets in the way of that ambition; if you endanger my brothers in any way, I'll kill you!"

Gaara and Naruto glanced back to Luffy, waiting to see his response.

Luffy smiled wide at Zoro's determination. It was one thing to hear a person's determination; it was another thing entirely to feel it. It rippled over his Haki, making his hair stand on end. It was the type of determination and devotion only an older sibling could have, mixed with a dream of the impossible. The unspoken *'I love my brothers, I won't let anything happen to them'* was clear in Zoro's voice.

This was a guy who was worthy of being on his crew.

"The Greatest Swordsman in the World, huh?" Luffy couldn't help but chuckle, adding, "If you can't accomplish something that small, you've got no right to call yourself the future Pirate King's nakama."

Both Naruto and Gaara shared a glance and grinned. Zoro's smirk widened. Luffy was certainly an interesting guy.

But the mood was broken when a shot rang through the air, and Coby started screaming.

"I've been shot! I'm gonna die!" Coby had been shot in the shoulder, and he was rolling on the floor due to the intense, burning pain. He had been punched and kicked plenty of times by Alvida and her crew, but none of them had ever shot him or broken a bone – likely because if he were injured, he couldn't work.

More shots were fired, and Gaara quickly moved his sand to shield them. A few bullets got passed his shield, though, since they were just outside his range, and Luffy moved to block them as well. His skin stretched back several inches before the bullets ricocheted off of him, and Luffy only laughed.

"Bullets don't work on me!"

Luffy felt something malicious hit him, and he frowned when he immediately recognized who was responsible.

Coming up from the opposite side of where the Marines were standing, Helmeppo was carrying a smoking pistol, and he moved

quickly and grabbed Coby purposefully by his injured shoulder. Pointing the pistol at Coby's head, Helmeppo seemed to think he had the upper hand. "Alright, all of you! Surrender now, or I'll kill him!"

Luffy glowered at Helmeppo and waved his hand in a shooing motion. "You again? Why're you here. Go away."

At that moment, Helmeppo looked rather insane; his hair mussed, his suit frayed and torn, and missing a shoe. The side of his face was already red and swollen, and well on its way to bruising; and his missing teeth were very evident. He turned even redder as he angrily snapped,

"I don't think you know what position you're in, here, Pirate!"

Captain Morgan wasn't happy. He was the furthest thing from it, in fact. His axe-arm hurt, and now those bothersome brats were disrespecting him even more by ignoring him! But now, even his useless son was proving to be of some worth as a distraction. He charged forward, ignoring the pain and swung his axe downwards, but the one wearing the straw hat simply dodged without even looking at him!

Swinging his axe once more, the man shouted, "I'm Captain Axe-Hand Morgan, and you will obey me! Now die!"

Luffy scowled, slowly turning his dark eyes towards Morgan.

"I'm Monkey D. Luffy. You're annoying. **Piss off!**"

Morgan couldn't even begin to explain how or why he froze upon seeing that gaze; why he felt so much fear in that moment; why he broke out into a cold sweat. He had thought that a power like that...it was just fairy tales... wasn't it? Before he could think on it further, Luffy's fist collided with his face. Luffy's punch was hard enough that the metal encasing Morgan's jaw dented substantially, and he fell to the floor in a broken and bloody heap.

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Just moments earlier, Coby stared at Luffy, absolutely terrified. He desperately wanted Luffy to save him, but... Luffy had been rescuing him since they met on Alvida's ship. His gaze drifted to the Roronoa Brothers, and he thought of the look of relief that Gaara had upon seeing Zoro was free. How Naruto grinned at Zoro, knowing that they would be alright... the way Zoro's expression softened just the

slightest bit...

If...if he were to die here...

He was sure, that there would be a time in the future that someone would hold a Marine hostage and demand that people let them have their way. But... if he wanted to be a Marine like the ones he'd admired, he'd have to start acting like it. Coby clenched his fists and slowly turned his head to glare at Helmeppo in all the defiance he could muster. *"Do it."*

Helmeppo lost the haughty look and one of confusion replaced it. "Wha-?"

Coby was unintentionally leaning towards Helmeppo, forcing him to take a step back. This sudden change in behavior threw Helmeppo off completely, because weren't people who had guns pointed at them supposed to be scared and beg for their lives?

"Go on and kill me, you stupid Bowl-Cut bastard! Then Luffy-san and Zoro-san and his brothers won't have to worry about rescuing me, and they can get out of here!"

Several bone-white shuriken flew at the pistol in Helmeppo's hand, stabbing him in the hand, as well as lodging into the gun's hammer so it couldn't properly fire. Helmeppo dropped his gun, and looked over to see Naruto start swinging his kusarigama, while Luffy punched Morgan into a messy heap.

Naruto didn't look happy as he started taking steps towards Helmeppo, slowly swinging his weapon in a small, controlled circle at his side. "You threatened Auntie Ririka and Rika-chan. You were going to execute Zoro-nii...and now...you're threatening Coby, 'ttebayo?"

Helmeppo fell back on his rear, and began sobbing. "Wait! Wait! You see, I was...I was joking!"

Naruto swung his kusarigama in a wide arc, and charged, "Liar!"

Helmeppo screamed and Coby closed his eyes, as he didn't want to see anyone die.

The kusarigama stopped just short of Helmeppo's manhood, and Naruto stood before the cowering man with a satisfied smirk on his face. He had pulled out his sword at some point during his charge, and simply tapped Helmeppo on the head with the back of his sword.

"You're dead, 'ttebayo."

Helmeppo soiled himself for the second time that day, and fainted.

"You...you didn't kill him..." Coby said dumbly, because he was absolutely positive that Naruto was more than willing to do just that.

"Eh...he's not worth killing, 'ttebayo." Naruto responded sagely, and he quickly gathered his thrown shuriken.

Coby could only respond with, "Oh...okay..."

The other Marines stared slack-jawed, and the Pirates (and Marine-to-be) were worried that the fighting would continue, but Luffy was still very willing to fight. "Bring it on!"

Unexpectedly, the Marines cheered, as Morgan's reign had ended. "We're free!"

Ignoring the fact that the Marines were jubilant with their leader defeated, Zoro sighed heavily as he sheathed his swords and removed his bandana. Luffy quickly caught him as he fell forward. The teen easily lifted Zoro by getting under his arm, proving that he was much stronger than he actually looked.

Meanwhile, Gaara approached the fallen form of Morgan. Staring coldly down at the man, Gaara gathered his sand around what remained of Morgan's axe-arm, and made sure that he took everything that had been his axe all the way up to his elbow, and although it creeped the observing Marines out, they made no move to stop him.

Coby looked a little green when he saw it, and he quickly glanced over at Luffy, who clearly had seen the entire thing. Luffy didn't look angry; in fact, Coby couldn't really read his expression. Zoro didn't say anything either, and Naruto simply watched with resigned indifference.

"Gaara!" Luffy called after the younger boy just moments after he was done. "Let's go!"

Gaara only nodded as he held the axe-arm close to his chest, and trailed after his brothers and Captain.

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Their group went back to the restaurant, and Rika was overjoyed to

see Zoro again, and Ririka more than happily offered Zoro, Luffy, and Coby a large meal.

Gaara placed his beloved gourd and the axe to the side, and looked up at Coby. "I can mend your wound, if you like."

"O-oh, okay, thank you..."

Coby sat down at a table and grunted somewhat painfully as he removed his shirt. Luffy joined him and smiled.

"You were pretty brave, back there, Coby!" Luffy slapped Coby's back while his shoulder twinged in protest. Luffy failed to notice that Coby wasn't as durable as he was, and he actually frowned and blinked at Coby, who was starting to look pale and ready to faint. "Eh, Coby? What's wrong?"

"N-nothing, Luffy-san..."

Rika brought over some medical supplies, and Gaara took one look at Coby's arm and said, "This looks worse than I thought. It's going to have to be amputated. No worries; I can do it right now. I need more bone for making Naruto's weapons anyway."

"WHAT?!" Coby screeched, leaning away from Gaara as far as he could without falling out of his chair. Those bone-white shuriken... *were actual Human bone?! Coby* paled considerably.

"Oh, you could get an axe-hand just like that Marine guy!" Luffy laughed.

Gaara manipulated his sand over to the axe and held it up, which still had fleshy bits on it. "I have his arm right here."

"I DON'T WANT THAT! My Marine career is going to be over before it's even started!"

Gaara poked him, a teasing smile on his face. "I was joking."

Coby looked at Gaara incredulously for the umpteenth time that day, completely slack-jawed, as the boy set the axe aside. Looking over at Naruto, the boy simply rolled his eyes as if this sort of thing happened all the time.

Sighing heavily, the teen muttered, "You nearly gave me a heart-attack with that comment, Gaara-kun."

Gaara merely shrugged and proceed to clean his wound and bandage it as best he could. While Gaara obviously wasn't a doctor, his work was passible enough that it wouldn't get infected and would heal properly. The worst would be that Coby would have a scar. Not that he minded.

"Ah, it feels much better!" Coby moved his arm somewhat after Gaara was done, thankful that the pain wasn't too bad. He'd still have to let it heal properly, though. "Thank you, Gaara-kun!"

"Thank you, Coby-san..." Gaara said quietly, and he gave Coby a small, genuine smile, "for helping Zoro-nii."

"I didn't do that much, actually." Coby rubbed the back of his head. "I mostly just followed you around and got shot."

"But you were willing to die."

Coby looked at the younger boy – Gaara was an enigma to him. Gaara was clearly much stronger than he was; Gaara was downright scary – on the battlefield and off of it – but yet in the end, he was a kid who had been worried and scared for his older brother. The feeling in Coby's chest was unfamiliar; but it was a nice one. Being thanked for helping save someone's life was a part of his dream of being a Marine. To be a hero to someone who needed it. The irony of the situation wasn't lost on him. Instead of rescuing civilians from Pirates; he had helped rescue a Pirate from Marines, and had become a hero to a Pirate.

"Of course, Gaara-kun." Coby smiled. "If I want to be a great Marine, I have to stand up for what's right."

"You're gonna be an *awesome* Marine, Coby, 'ttebayo!"

It was also strange that *Pirates* were encouraging him to be a Marine.

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It was really something that a guy who was starving couldn't eat as much as a guy who clearly wasn't. Luffy had even eaten more than Naruto and Gaara – *combined*. The townsfolk had brought over their own cooked dishes as a way to not only help Ririka, but to thank their town's saviors as well.

"How can you possibly eat *more* than me?" Zoro wondered, as he nursed a bottle of beer.

"I really like food!" Luffy said with a smile, as if that answered the question.

"Well, whatever..." Zoro muttered. "Anyway, besides me and my brothers, who else is on the crew?"

"It's just us."

"Us'?" Zoro pointed to himself and Luffy.

"Yep! You guys are the *first* of my *nakama*! Isn't that great? Shishishi!"

"The first, huh..." Naruto spoke up. "So does that mean you already have a ship that can fit all of us?"

"Yep," Luffy pointed out the window.

The three brothers each looked to see a small boat tied to the docks.

"...There's a dog peeing on it." Naruto said flatly.

"It's so small, we'll probably all get drowned at sea if a wave just brushes up against it." Gaara muttered. It was smaller than the Toad Sage's boat had been.

"It's a good thing we have a small ship, then..." Zoro said. "Although, it's a few years old and needs some repairs."

"Really? That's great! Well, we'll just get a new ship later, if we need it." Luffy said with a careless wave, as if ships were simply handed out to people. "We're gonna need a capable ship anyway if we're going to the Grand Line."

"The Grand Line?!" Coby shouted. "*No!* That's too dangerous!"

Zoro cocked a brow at the teen. "What's got your underwear in a twist?"

"Why? It's not like you're coming with us, 'ttebayo..."

"I can still be worried for you guys! The Grand Line is extremely dangerous! People *die* there!"

"I've killed people." Gaara responded factually, and Coby looked ill.

"That isn't the point..." Coby murmured at the lost cause of his concern.

"Well...I was actually gonna ask you about that, Luffy." Naruto looked to the Captain. "I've heard that Pirates are pillagers and murderers... so...what kind of Pirates are we?"

Luffy looked very serious even as he smiled, replying, "Free ones!" Their Captain counted on his fingers, "People who go on adventures, have parties, play music, eat meat, and see the world. That's what being on the future Pirate King's crew is all about!" Luffy's eyes shined with excitement that pulled both younger boys in.

"Okay!"

Just then, several Marines marched into the restaurant, and all eyes were on them.

One of the men stepped forward, and saying, "Excuse me, but...are you Pirates? If that's the case, I'm afraid we'll have to ask you to leave."

Someone protested, "Hey, you can't just make 'em leave! They *saved* our town!"

"Be that as it may, they're still criminals."

If anyone sitting at the table had known Luffy for longer than a few hours, they would have noticed that he was uncharacteristically quiet.

"I know you saved our town, and we're grateful for it, but we have to-"

"**BULLSHIT!**" Luffy shouted, slamming his fist on the table, rattling the stacked dishes.

Everyone stared at Luffy, and finally noticed the deadly serious storm his dark eyes held. Somehow, this side of Luffy caused Zoro, Gaara, and Naruto to feel on edge. Luffy had a storm beneath his calm, smiling demeanor, and it wasn't ever something they wanted directed at them.

"You were going to kill their older brother!" Luffy was incensed. How dare they?! How could they have the nerve?! He wanted them to understand just how infuriating it was! Luffy *knew* that loss. "It's an older brother's job to look after his siblings and that's what Zoro did, and you were going to *kill* him! You were going to take them *away* from each other!"

The Marines naturally withdrew, arguments dying on their lips.

Because they knew that Luffy was right. Both Naruto and Gaara looked at Luffy, as they processed what he was saying. To Zoro, it sounded personal beyond him simply being angry that the corrupt Marines had nearly executed him and left his brothers on their own.

"Luffy, it's alright," Zoro started. "We have to go anyway."

"No, it's not!" Luffy shot back. "They should let you rest until we're ready to go."

"Captain..." Gaara looked up at Luffy. "You've done enough for us. Let's go out to sea, now."

Naruto grabbed Luffy's hand. "We've been here long enough, Luffy. I think we've overstayed our welcome, 'ttebayo."

"I agree with the brats." Zoro took a swig of sake and stood up. "I'm gettin' restless. We've never stayed in one place for so long."

Luffy looked at his crew; as small as it was, and nodded firmly in understanding. He then turned his attention onto Coby, who winced back when the storm in Luffy's eyes was directed at him. The Captain's gaze glanced over to the Marines, who were watching him nervously.

"This guy is gonna be a Marine, so you *better* let him join you." Luffy's tone was one that offered no room for argument. "Coby!"

Coby knocked his chair to the floor as he stood at attention and saluted, mostly out of instinct. "Yes, sir?!"

"If you *ever* become a Marine like *them*, I'll personally sail back from wherever I am in the Grand Line and kick your ass! Understand?"

It was a slap to the face for the Marines who heard it. A Pirate, of all people, was telling them how to properly do their job. A boy who wasn't even properly enlisted, had more bravery than all of them combined in that one moment as he stood up to Helmeppo.

Coby's salute was unwavering as he smiled wide. "Understood!"

"Thanks for everything Auntie, 'ttebayo." Naruto said as they were leaving, and everyone else offered their thanks as well, waving goodbye.

The Pirates made their way towards the docks, Luffy marching forward with purpose, even though he looked stiff. Zoro frowned at

his Captain, wondering what was going on. There wasn't any of the looseness in his movements that had been there on their way from the Base. Even Naruto and Gaara noticed the inconsistency, and they were looking up at Luffy, wondering if they should say anything.

Curiosity from Zoro, and worry from Naruto and Gaara washed over him, and Luffy slowed down to a stop.

"Luffy, are you alright?" Zoro asked.

"I had two older brothers," Luffy commented quietly. His smile was wistful as he added, "I caused trouble for them all time, and they looked out for me." Luffy looked at his *nakama*, his dark eyes showing an emotion that didn't seem to belong there. "But it's just me and Ace now. I promised him I'd get stronger so he wouldn't have to worry about me."

While he and Ace had trained for seven years until Ace left, their conversations about their other brother became less and less. With no-one to talk about Sabo with, Luffy had thought about Sabo less and less as well over the years. But today, Ace and Sabo came to the forefront of his mind as he spotted two kids who were worried about their older brother; and an older brother who cared enough about his younger siblings that he was willing to subject himself to humiliation and starvation so that nothing would happen to them. Luffy wanted to see Ace again; to show him what an awesome crew he already had, even though he just started. For a fleeting moment, Luffy wondered what Sabo would have thought of his *nakama*.

The wide smile was back now, "Let's go to the Grand Line!"

Putting his hand on his shoulder, Zoro just nodded. "Of course, Captain."

Luffy grinned widely at the ship that was in the Roronoa Brother's possession. It was old, but it would have to do until they got a ship that could fit all of their future *nakama*.

They loaded themselves into their small ship, and soon they were off. Their ship was still a distance away when Coby ran out onto the dock.

"LUFFY-SAN! ZORO-SAN! NARUTO-KUN! GAARA-KUN! I PROMISE TO BECOME A STRONG MARINE AND CAPTURE YOU SOMEDAY! TAKE CARE OF YOURSELVES!"

Coby stood at attention and saluted.

Luffy laughed and waved, calling back, "You too!"

"What a weird thing to promise someone..." Zoro commented.

The four of them were honestly surprised to see that the rest of the Marines had gathered behind Coby and were saluting them as well.

"Isn't it taboo for Marines to salute Pirates?" Naruto wondered.

"Yeah, but who cares?" Luffy grinned at his three (but what felt like five) crewmembers. "We had fun, right? And Coby's a good guy."

"So what's next?" Gaara asked.

"Next, we find a musician!" Luffy declared. "Because Pirates like to sing and party."

Well, that sounded good, but...

"I think we need priorities, 'ttebayo..."

Luffy looked affronted. "A musician is *totally* a priority!" looking serious, Luffy added in a pitying tone that was very genuine, "You must've led such a boring life until this point." He stretched an arm out (slightly startling the others who weren't quite used to it yet) to where Naruto was sitting to pat him on the shoulder. "It's alright, though. We'll be having all the parties we want, soon enough."

"Can you have ramen at parties, 'ttebayou?"

"What's ramen? Can you eat it?"

Now, it was Naruto's turn to look affronted. "It's only the best food *ever*, 'ttebayou!"

The boy proceeded to tell Luffy all about ramen, which of course, was several hours' worth of details. Drool started dripping from Luffy's mouth the more he heard and his stomach growled. After Naruto was done, Luffy shot to his feet and raised his fists above his head.

"YOSH! Naruto! I promise you; as your Captain that we *will* find a cook who can prepare ramen for us so that we can eat it at every meal and at every party!"

Naruto's eyes sparkled as he cried tears of joy. "*Hai~!* I'll follow you forever, Captain, 'ttebayou!"

The two proceeded to chant, "Ramen, ramen, we're gonna eat ramen!" while doing some sort of weird dance.

Zoro easily ignored their antics and went to sleep; it was the first time he could truly relax in weeks. Gaara settled next to him, but not because he was tired. He just wanted to be close to Zoro after being separated for so long. He watched his Captain and brother curiously, amused by their antics.

Kyuubi rolled his eyes. What were these three thinking, joining this guy?

Ichibi sighed. How come no-one thought to consult the unwilling passengers in this venture? Fuckin' brats...

Once they had settled down, it was late afternoon. Luffy leaned against the mast with the Roronoa Brothers, and grinned in satisfaction. He closed his eyes and focused on the three of them. Zoro was relaxed; Gaara was content, although annoyed about something; Naruto felt jittery, as if he wanted to move. The boy was probably restless after staying in one place for so long. Then, there were also those two odd, invisible members.

The one that hovered around Gaara was lashing out in irritated waves; and the one that hovered around Naruto seemed to moan and chatter – sort of like rocks on a chalkboard. That must be why the blond was so jittery.

Whatever they were, Luffy wasn't sure. It wasn't any of his business, so he wouldn't ask. Besides, if his *nakama* felt it was important enough to know, they would tell him.

Luffy honestly couldn't believe his luck, though. Three *nakama* in one go! Plus, he didn't think Shanks had any Ninja on his crew; nor did he have someone who controlled sand like Gaara did. He may have had a few Swordsmen, but none of them used *three* swords. Luffy had kept up on Shanks and the Red Hair Pirates' exploits over the years thanks to newspapers. None of them ever mentioned any members of Shanks' crew doing that weird and totally cool "ghosting" thing that Zoro could do.

Luffy could only laugh to himself. He was already well on the way to having an amazing crew.

Chapter End Notes

sigh Nobody asks what the unwilling passengers think. Expect a lot of that. So, I've changed things up a bit in Shells Town. I'm aiming to change things from slightly, to drastically, diverting aspects of canon as we delve into other arcs and more characters come in.

Next time: poor, poor Nami... how much can her frazzled nerves handle?

Fortune Smiles Upon the Thief, Though She Cannot See It Yet

Chapter Summary

After rescuing a group of stranded men in the middle of the ocean, Luffy and his group end up going to Orange Town where Buggy the Clown has set up base. While there, the group end up running into the orange-and-belli-loving Thief, Nami. Seeing as she has little choice, Nami strikes up a deal with the Pirates so she can steal Buggy's treasure. All Nami can do at this point is hope that her patience and sanity lasts.

Chapter Notes

Nami comes in here, and very unwittingly she took over a good portion of this chapter. I also ended up having to cut a good portion from this chapter and put it into the next one... editing is so much fun.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

***Flashback: East Blue; Dawn Island, Seven Years Ago ***

...

Ace and Luffy made a mad dash through the forest as an enraged Mountain Lord chased after them. The brothers ducked and weaved through the thick trees, which unfortunately didn't slow the Lord down if at all.

"*Shit, shit, shit, shit!*" Ace was practically yelling with every step.

They hadn't anticipated the strength and speed of this particular Lord. Ace was currently regretting all of his short life's choices. They had thought that they could take on the "oversized floor rug" as Ace had seen fit to call the giant tiger. Ace had assumed that he and Luffy could defeat it with little to no trouble.

But a single, downward pipe swing to the head even from several feet up had only enraged it, and Luffy's punching it in the side (despite his claims of his punches being like a bullet) hadn't helped things. So now, here they were, running for their lives.

Although he was nervous and a tad bit scared, Luffy grinned, enjoying this far too much. *"Shishishi!"*

"Stop laughing, Lu!" Ace demanded.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"You don't sound sorry at all!"

There was a clearing just ahead, and it led to a cliff with a sudden and very steep drop-off with several rocks and harsh waves at the bottom. The gears in Ace's head began to spin.

"If we make it to the cliff, maybe we can trick the Lord to go over the edge!"

"Oh!" Luffy grinned, motioning rapidly to himself. *"I could do that tripping-clothesline thing!"*

"Just make sure you don't go over with him! There's no way I can jump in to save you if you fall!"

Minutes later, the brothers burst into the clearing; but collided with someone who they both could have sworn up and down wasn't standing there before, knocking them to the ground. The two looked up; Ace slightly more dazed than Luffy was. Some sort of stylized reptilian mask covered the top half of his face, and his midnight-blue hair was pulled into a ponytail.

"Oww..." he muttered, *"knocked the wind outta me..."*

He shifted up into a sitting position, and he looked at the two boys practically sitting in his lap.

"What're you two kids doin'?"

"Running away!" Luffy said cheerfully.

"From what?" the man asked, likely not concerned because of Luffy's too-upbeat attitude.

Just then, the Mountain Lord burst out of the trees with a furious snarl, causing the man's jaw to drop and his eyes to widen.

"From that!" Ace shouted, getting ready to grab Luffy and run – and if the poor bastard got caught, then he'd be a distraction so that they could get away.

That was when something happened: the stranger grabbed both boys; the world seemed to slide around them as they stood still, and just like that; they were several feet away from where they had been.

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Luffy woke up when someone bumped him.

"Huh?" Luffy blinked blearily at the messy blond hair that filled his vision.

"Sorry to bother you, Luffy. But it's lunchtime, 'ttebayou."

"Food!" Luffy cheered, suddenly standing up. His movement and a timely gust of wind caused his hat to blow off of his head.

"My hat!"

Luffy nearly panicked, trying to reach it before it flew into the water.

Moving quickly, Gaara used his sand to grab Luffy's hat, and gently gave it back to his Captain.

"Oh, that's awesome! Thanks, Gaara." Luffy said, as he gently ran his fingers along the red ribbon of the hat.

"That hat must mean a lot to you," Zoro observed, given how Luffy reacted when he nearly lost it. "Here," Zoro passed Luffy a sandwich.

"Thanks!" Luffy grinned as he held up the aforementioned hat. "This hat is my treasure – Shanks gave me this hat. I promised him I'd give it back once I became a great Pirate."

Zoro quirked an eyebrow. "Shanks? As in *Red-Haired* Shanks? That guy's a Yonko, ain't he?"

"Yep! He's the guy who inspired me to be a Pirate." Turning to his *nakama*, he asked, "So, what about you guys? Any important treasures?"

Zoro placed a hand on Wado Ichimonji. "This sword. I made a promise with a friend to become the greatest Swordsman in the world."

Naruto grinned and held up a worn, but clearly well-cared for short sword. Pride and excitement rippled off of him. "This is the first thing that Zoro-nii ever gave me, 'ttebayo!"

Gaara hugged his gourd close to his chest. "This gourd. It was also the first thing Zoro-nii gave me when he encouraged me to use my sand." Gaara gave a small smile as he indicated the various trinkets that were attached to the gourd; "This is a bone from our friend, Kimimaro. Although it's much smaller now than it used to be. He gave it to me after he pulled it out of his arm, and I've used it to make gifts for my brothers. This seashell is from the time we visited the ocean in Naruto's home country with some friends. There were ugly birds there. These teeth are from the first bounty I ever caught by myself."

Luffy admired the various other trinkets from where he sat, nodding along to Gaara's stories that involved how he had accumulated them.

"You're such a caring older brother," Luffy said to Zoro with a wide grin, after Gaara was done. "I *knew* you were a good guy. Shishishi!"

Zoro's face flushed and he muttered under his breath about "an annoying rubber bastard" and quickly stuffed his face with one of the sandwiches. Luffy merrily laughed at the response. He felt mild embarrassment, pride, and fondness wash over Zoro, and knew that he wasn't actually angry. Luffy was curious though – he could tell that the three of them clearly weren't related, along with judging by the younger boys' comments.

There had to be quite a few stories there, Luffy knew. But he wasn't one to go nosing around someone's past like that – if they wanted to tell him, they would. It wasn't like he, Ace, and Sabo had been related by blood, so who was he to judge?

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A few hours later, Luffy's stomach abruptly gave out an animalistic growl, and all three brothers stared at him in surprise. Luffy glanced up at the sky mournfully. "I'm hungry...huh?"

"But we just ate, 'ttebayou..." Naruto pointed out. Even *he* wasn't hungry right now. But...if he had the option to eat, he wouldn't complain.

Just then, the Captain grinned wide. "Yosh! There's our lunch!"

Three pairs of eyes all looked up to see a large, pink bird above them.

"We still have some of Auntie's food left, though..." Gaara stated uncertainly, wondering why Luffy wanted to hunt for food right now.

"But we can have that *and* eat our sandwiches with it too." Luffy stubbornly reasoned. "Pirates like to eat meat, after all."

"I'm beginning to think that's just you." Zoro grumbled, but that just earned him Luffy sticking his tongue out.

"...How are we gonna get it, though?" Naruto wondered aloud as he glanced up at the bird and shielded his eyes against the sun. Hunting was always fun – only if you were able to catch something. Here, it seemed like a guarantee.

"We can just knock out of the sky, easy!"

"...How are we gonna cook it?" Naruto asked, since it seemed that he was the only one who supported Luffy on this small venture.

Luffy was unconcerned. "We'll just eat it raw."

"But...that doesn't really seem healthy." Gaara said. "Isn't that how people get those giant worms that eat their way out of people's stomachs?"

Luffy made a face. "I've eaten plenty of animals raw, and I've *never* gotten sick. *Or* worms."

"*Never?*" Naruto echoed, decidedly ignoring the mental imagery that Gaara's comment caused.

"Not once." Luffy confirmed with a hint of well-deserved pride.

Even Gaara was looking at Luffy with admiration now.

Zoro observed the three's antics with some amusement. Although, he had to wonder how strong Luffy's stomach had to be to withstand not getting sick from eating undercooked food.

"*Gomu-Gomu no...Rocket!*"

Luffy's arms stretched up to grab the bird, and with Naruto hanging onto him, they hurtled towards the bird. Unfortunately, the bird was much bigger than any of them had anticipated, and Luffy's head was caught by the oversized creature.

"*AHH!* It's got me!"

That elicited a reaction from the two down below with Zoro wondering if he could effectively sail their ship after a wayward Luffy

and Naruto.

"You idiot!" Zoro shouted, wondering if maybe fading up above the bird would be the better option.

Gaara was ready to start shooting large clumps of sand at the bird, although he felt compelled to mention, "It's a good thing Captain's rubber otherwise it'd probably crush his head."

Both brothers breathed sighs of relief when Luffy's limbs wrapped around the bird's head, as he tried to make the thing release him. The bird started flailing around, and Naruto couldn't help but laugh at both Luffy's predicament and the wild ride. Hanging onto Luffy with his legs and one arm, Naruto drew his sword with the other. Naruto quickly sliced through the bird's throat; causing them to go into a freefall. They were fortunate enough to not get any blood on them with all the thrashing the bird was doing.

Luffy was able to pull himself out of the bird's mouth and he clung to the bird's head as they careened towards the ocean. A large hand reached out and grabbed them before they hit the water.

Luffy whooped as he jumped back on board, "You guys are amazing!"

"That bird's way bigger than I thought..." Zoro said. He shuddered at the thought of ill-luck. "For a moment there, I was worried that thing would fly off with you..."

Luffy laughed. "As if that would've ever happened, Naruto was there."

Although he basked in the praise, Naruto pointed out, "This thing's bigger than our ship. We don't have the room to properly clean and cook it, 'ttebayou."

"Let's just eat it once we've run out of the food we already have." Zoro firmly suggested. "You've still got room in your scrolls, brat?"

Naruto shifted through a few of his scrolls and he briefly wondered if they would have to forsake their prey to the sharks before pulling out a scroll and held it skyward in victory.

"I've got one!"

"Oh..." Luffy moped in disappointment at the loss of a meal.

When Naruto Sealed the bird away into a scroll, Luffy's eyes were

shining like a beacon. The Captain forgot all about food in that moment as he fawned over Naruto's abilities.

"That's so cool..." Luffy said, looking from where the bird had been to Naruto. "You're amazing, Naruto. Can you Seal people away too? How much food can you Seal away?"

Naruto nervously scratched the back of his head. He was overjoyed that someone outside of his brothers recognized his skills; it was the first time that someone thought that his talents were so praiseworthy. Naruto had seen how certain things were supposed to look, and his Jutsu scrolls described how things were supposed to look as well. He was well-aware that he was lacking, but with every Ninja-related thing that he did no matter how lack-luster, Luffy was overly impressed.

"Thanks! Uh, Sealing dead people is hard but easier than living ones; and as long as I make the right strokes on the Seal and accommodate for any foods that have a chance of spoiling, and the paper is sturdy enough, I can carry just about anything, 'ttebayou."

"Wow..."

There was a slight dilemma, though... while they did have scrolls to Seal various items away, the scrolls they had now were becoming worn down from constant use and there was only so much Naruto could do to adjust the Seals. A certain kind of sturdy paper was needed, and well, so far it could only be found in the Elemental Nations. Perhaps if they came across an island that had bamboo trees, Naruto could get what he needed.

Even Zoro was being conservative for when and where he used his weights, never letting them touch the deck. He had to store them somewhere, and his scrolls only had room for his weights. It wouldn't be pleasant to have the oversized barbells suddenly break through their ship whilst in the middle of the ocean.

"Yeah...I want to be the greatest Ninja ever," Naruto grinned back. "I want my name to reach the heavens, 'ttebayou!"

"Truly an admirable goal worthy of one who sails under the Pirate King," Luffy replied, as if it were nothing but fact.

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As they sailed further along, Luffy's brow furrowed as he sat up from

his spot by the figurehead. "There's people in the water..."

Sure enough, as they sailed by, three men in the water called out, "Hey! Let us up, please!"

It was easy for Gaara to simply form a hand and scoop them all out of the sea. Once the men were on board, they coughed and spluttered, and one started speaking,

"Thank you! Thank you so much!"

"Yes, thank you!" another agreed.

"We'd no idea what would've happened to us if you hadn't come along!" The third one wailed.

"What happened to you guys, 'ttebayou?"

"Some sea witch stole our boat yesterday!"

"Sea witch?" Naruto questioned, imagining a horrid-looking, woman covered in scales and seaweed, hissing and sticking her unnaturally long tongue out.

"She pretended to be in peril!" one of the men answered angrily, and Zoro narrowed his eyes at him. He had a pointy nose and curly red hair. There was something *very* familiar about this guy.

"Now..." Luffy scowled when he felt a sense of malice emit from the men. Two of them drew short swords and daggers, while the third brought out a pistol. "We'll thank you to give us this ship."

Luffy's extended fist sent one guy flying back into the ocean.

Another ended up with shuriken embedded in both hands and a sword at his throat.

Gaara's sand easily grabbed the men's weapons, effectively disarming them.

The final man found himself lying flat on the deck with a sword at his throat that threatened to decapitate him if he made any suspicious moves. The man gaped up at the Swordsman for about thirty seconds before he spoke.

"Zoro? No way..." the man he had pinned down nearly grinned, but kept still as to prevent himself from being cut. "You're Roronoa Zoro,

aren't you? Don't you remember me?"

Zoro blinked and glared down at the man. Zoro knew this guy from somewhere, and his comment proved it. "Who the hell are you?"

The man sweat-dropped a little. "I was in Koshiro-sensei's class with you! I was a few years ahead of you. You wiped the floor with me, even back then!"

Zoro pulled back, really taking the man's appearance in. "Enji?"

"Yeah!" Enji sat up now that Zoro was no longer threatening to decapitate him. "You *do* remember me! Wow, you've really gotten taller!"

"You know them?" Luffy questioned.

"Just this guy," Zoro indicated Enji. "We trained at the same dojo together for several years."

"Sorry about attacking you like this," Enji scratched the back of his head. "Didn't realize who you were... uh...would you mind pulling our friend back onboard?"

"As long as he doesn't attack us again." Luffy said. "Oi, Gaara. Get that guy back, will you?"

Gaara glowered, even as he retrieved the overboard man. "I think we should just cut off his legs and let the sharks feast on him."

The man in question paled. "Please, no!"

Enji and the other guy looked worried.

Zoro rolled his eyes, Naruto asked, 'really?' and Luffy... Luffy burst out laughing.

"You're so funny, Gaara!"

The three "guests" stared at Luffy incredulously.

"...I was being serious."

"Of course," Luffy said, once he had finished laughing, "Anyway, give up *all* your weapons, otherwise we'll tie you to our ship and you can swim alongside us."

The men were quick to comply, relinquishing any hidden weapons they may have had on their person.

"Can I have their weapons, Captain?" Gaara asked.

"Sure," Luffy shrugged. "Help yourself."

Once the three were no longer considered a threat, Gaara immediately started grinding the weapons down.

"Hm? What're ya doing?" Luffy asked, as he suddenly leaned into Gaara's personal space. Actually, just his head did. The three newcomers' jaws practically hit the deck at the display, even though they were used to seeing a Devil Fruit in action.

"I'm making weapons for Naruto." Gaara answered, raising a brow at the feat.

"Ohhh," Luffy of course, praised, "how cool! What else can you make?"

"Charms are fun." Gaara directed his gaze towards the "guests". "... Human bone is the best."

The trio cringed and sweat-dropped, while Luffy chuckled, because there was no malice behind Gaara's words; just annoyance and a teasing empty threat. With the worry that wafted off of the trio, they wouldn't try anything that incited the risk of Gaara actually using them as materials.

Turning his attention back to the trio, Luffy's neck went back to normal and he motioned to the shirt that one of the men was wearing and asked,

"So, whose Jolly Rodger is that?"

"You don't know? It's Captain Buggy, the most feared Pirate this side of the Grand Line!" one of the men proudly stated. "Buggy the Clown!"

"Oh, I saw a clown once!" Naruto started excitedly. "More than one at the same time, 'ttebayou!"

"You went to a circus? Lucky!" Luffy responded.

Zoro furrowed his brow in confusion. When had they ever been to a place with clowns?

"There were colorful lights, and the men and women wore tight and

colorful outfits, with feathery coats and lots and lots of makeup, 'ttebayou!"

Zoro suddenly had a sinking feeling in his stomach. His suspicions were confirmed as Naruto continued.

"They had a funny smell on them too, lots o' smoke and sickly sweet perfume..." Luffy was entranced, and the trio of men had varying reactions of muffled laughter once they understood what Naruto was talking about.

"Oh..." Luffy nodded. "That sounds kinda like the circus one of the Mountain Bandits always told me to stay away from in Goa," with a frown and a hand to his chin, Luffy added, "Dogra never told me *why*, though. He did have these funny bruises on his neck, at times..."

"Anyway," Zoro loudly cleared his throat and brought everyone's attention back on track, "tell us about Buggy."

"Wouldn't you like to know!" one man laughed as he stuck out his tongue childishly.

Zoro scowled darkly, causing the three men to huddle together nervously. Turning to the others, he began, "Storytime. When Enji was fifteen, Sensei needed him to run an errand. So after calling him a bunch of times, and Enji not answering, Sensei goes looking for him..." Enji immediately paled and started sweating nervously. "Weirdest thing. Sensei caught him in his room, facing the wall with his-!"

"**ALRIGHT!**" Enji shouted, blush even redder than his hair. He hated having to do this, but this was his reputation at stake, dammit! It was made worse because Craig was a freaking gossip-lover and always spread the embarrassing stories that no-one ever wanted to come to light like wildfire in a dry field on a windy day. The entire crew would more than certainly know about his worst humiliation before the day's end! Hell, he wouldn't even be surprised if the *townsfolk* caught wind of it.

"Captain Buggy has a Devil Fruit that lets him not be cut by swords! He can disconnect his body parts at will."

"Huh, that's useful." Luffy said.

"Like, *all* his body parts?" Naruto asked.

"Yes." Enji confirmed.

"He can even do his dick, or so I've heard," one of the trio helpfully piped in.

That was information no-one needed or wanted to know.

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The men really had no other choice but to guide the Pirates to Orange Town, where Buggy had set up base. At the insistence of a flustered, thoroughly embarrassed Enji, they even ended up telling the rival crew about their strongest members.

After they docked, the trio ran off, with one yelling over his shoulder, "Remember to tremble in fear in the presence of the mighty Buggy!"

Luffy put a hand on his hat. "Man, those guys were weird and annoying."

"Let's explore, 'ttebayou!" Naruto said. But he blushed slightly as he turned to Luffy. "If that's okay with you, Luffy?"

"Of course," Luffy grinned. With a thoughtful look on his face, Luffy looked around then pointed in a random direction that looked the most interesting. "Hmmm...let's go that way!"

"Yes, Captain!" both Gaara and Naruto chorused.

Zoro simply followed along, although he silently rolled his eyes when Naruto grabbed his arm.

"Zoro-nii gets lost if someone doesn't hold onto him," Naruto explained to Luffy.

"Oh, are you an idiot?" a teasing smile graced Luffy's face, "Is that why you got lost at the Base?"

"Screw you, I don't get lost."

"Zoro-nii gets lost," Gaara affirmed to Luffy.

Zoro grumbled in disagreement under his breath.

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In another part of town, Nami was cursing her luck, for having getting

caught in this situation. She had foolishly underestimated Buggy's crew – because quite honestly, the man was an idiot. It was that ridiculous behavior that caused her to think that stealing from him would be *easy*. But Buggy was paranoid; especially when it came to his treasure.

She had flirted her way passed the Pirates, talked to Buggy and played him like a fiddle as she admired his strength and prowess. All of it had taken hours; almost an entire day – and all of it was undone within two minutes when someone caught her in the treasure room. They had sounded the alarm, and since yesterday evening, Nami had been hiding out in the various houses of the only-recently abandoned town.

Nami was exhausted from only getting a few hours' sleep, since she didn't dare stay in one place for more than an hour or two at most. All night, she heard the booms of a cannon firing, and the resulting explosions. Buggy must have ordered his men to randomly fire into the town and hope that they either found her or her corpse. The young woman was running on fumes and frayed nerves.

She was sneaking her way towards the docks, planning on stealing a boat – anything that would help her get away from this place – Nami figured she could always come back later, when a voice shouted, "**YOU! THIEF!**"

Four men at the other end of the street who had come around the corner just as she stepped out gave chase. Nami cursed, and the only thing she could do was head to the docks and hope that the boat she stole from that perverted trio would still be there – or she would have to find a new one. If she really had to, she could simply dive into the water and swim to another side of the island and work towards obtaining a boat from there. But she refused to leave the treasure she had already acquired behind... hopefully things wouldn't resort to her having to fight for her treasure.

Thinking quickly, Nami jumped a nearby fence and ran through a yard to jump over another fence. The men chasing her weren't as agile, and she could hear them crashing through everything in their path that she had easily dodged. Nami jumped out from between two houses, and it was just her luck, she spotted two guys – one with a straw hat and another with green hair. They weren't part of Buggy's crew, which meant they had a boat! They must have docked on the side of the island Buggy wasn't guarding.

The two weren't paying any attention to her, but they were looking

around, obviously curious and were on guard. Understandably, as those four idiots chasing her weren't exactly being quiet.

Sneaking a glance to the four giving chase, Nami called out, "Boss! Boss! Hey, Boss!"

"Do you think that everyone... Huh?" Luffy turned towards the girl. "Who's that?"

"Why's she acting like she knows you...?" Zoro wondered.

"Oh, I'm so glad you're here!" Nami said quickly. She turned towards her pursuers and smiled. Motioning to the pair, not caring which one was the assumed 'boss', she continued with, "This is my Boss! He can handle everything from here!"

She planned to steal their boat once they were busy fighting each other.

"Oi, Boss-man! That wench was stealing from us!" one of the men shouted, automatically looking at Zoro.

At the same time, another one of the men was looking at Luffy, saying, "Don't think your woman can get away with stealing from the Buggy Pirates!"

"Wait, we don't know her, 'ttebayo!" a voice protested, and that was when Nami looked behind the green-haired guy and notice two boys – probably eleven or twelve years old if that – and her eyes widened in horror. *What had she just done?!*

Luffy glanced towards her, wondering why this mystery girl was suddenly panicking and why there was so much worry and fear.

The redhead glared at her, saying with a near-growl, "Captain doesn't know you."

"Quit lying and pay up with your lives!" the one who had addressed Zoro said, as he charged. The others followed suit. Nami could only look on in horror; because just for a brief moment, she saw a woman with red hair and a large Fishman with a gun standing before her, and she and her sister watched helplessly as she-

But Nami needn't have worried, because the four guys each took care of the grunts with ease. The straw-hat kid easily tilted his head to the side to dodge an incoming blade, and then he punched the guy in the

gut, *hard*. Nami was sure she heard something crack.

The man simply crumpled to the ground.

The green-haired guy just wacked his attacker over the head with the backside of his sword, and he was down.

The blond kid pulled out some sort of chain weapon, and twirled it with ease before wrapping one end of the chain around the charging man's neck. He used the man's own momentum against him and flipped the man over his head and into the ground. It was hard enough that the man left a small dent in the earth.

The redhead formed a large fist out of sand, raised it upwards several feet before bringing it down onto his opponent as if he were swatting a fly.

With that, all four of them turned to Nami, and a large, sandy arm blocked her path. She had nowhere to go. Nami gulped.

"Who the hell are you?" the redhead growled out, and instinctively Nami stiffened in fear.

The green-haired guy reached out just then, and ruffled the kid's hair. "Calm down, sand-brat. Let her explain herself."

The redhead responded by pouting, but his glare didn't lessen.

Nami straightened, hoping she didn't show any fear. Yes, she had been in perilous situations before, but...it was different with that red-hair kid. "I'm Nami, a thief who steals from Pirates," she winked, "I like money and oranges."

"I'm Monkey D. Luffy, the future Pirate King." Luffy said with a confident grin.

Nami frowned. Of *course* Pirates would turn children into one of *them*.

"Roronoa Zoro, Swordsman."

"Roronoa Naruto, soon to be the world's best Ninja, 'ttebayou!" Naruto posed in a way that he thought was pretty cool.

A Ninja-Pirate? Nami couldn't help but look at the boy with incredulity. What sort of combination was *that*?

"Roronoa Gaara, mutilator of anyone who dares to defy us." Gaara

stared at her intently.

So these guys were *brothers*? Their names sounded familiar...wait...the Roronoa Brothers, as in the *Bounty Hunter* Roronoa's? They were *Pirates* now?

"Your bones would certainly make fine weapons."

Nami nearly screamed, but the frightening moment was cut short when Zoro whacked Gaara's head, "Oi!"

Naruto turned on his heel to yell at his brother. "Gaara! Now's not the time for that!"

Luffy laughed, apparently not caring that this kid had just threatened someone. The Captain then turned to Nami. "So, what were those guys chasing you for?"

Nami didn't like having to answer to Pirates, but maybe...maybe she could use them. She would just have to be careful and play her cards right. "I tried to steal a very important map from Buggy the Clown. I would have gotten away with it and been out of here by now, but I was caught."

"You must not be a very good thief, then, 'ttebayou..." Naruto looked at her with a slightly concerned and pitying expression.

"I'm an excellent thief, you brat!" Nami shouted indignantly. "I didn't expect one of those drunk idiots to wander into the office where the safe is!"

"What was on the map?" Zoro questioned, getting them back on track.

Smirking and holding up her hand to make the classic sign for 'money', Nami replied, "It's a map to the Grand Line, along with various locations that have been marked for having treasure. I intend to sail there and steal all the treasure I can."

Naruto then raised his hand. "Nami, you can read maps?"

"Yes, I can. I also happen to be the best Navigator this side of the Blues."

"You can navigate?" Gaara asked.

For some reason, both Naruto and Gaara looked at her with really odd expressions. Relief? Hopefulness? She wasn't really sure. "Uh, yeah?"

The two younger boys shared a knowing glance before glancing back at Luffy and Zoro. Luffy was looking at Nami, a wide grin on his face. "That's awesome! Join my crew, and be my Navigator, Nami!"

"No way, I hate Pirates!"

"But we *need* a Navigator!" Naruto argued. "We *can't* sail to the Grand Line without a Navigator. Besides, we're heading to the same place, let's sail together, 'ttebayou!"

"...If we don't have a Navigator we'll be lost at sea due to Weather Spots and forced to cannibalism." Gaara added with a straight face.

"*Exactly!*" Naruto agreed. "I don't want to be eaten first just because I'm the youngest, 'ttebayou."

"We had to eat one of our own just days ago..."

Zoro groaned, muttering, "Not this again."

Luffy couldn't help it as he laughed, and Nami looked as if she had just stepped foot into a madhouse. These Pirates...*ate* people?!

Luffy stopped laughing when fear and worry assaulted his senses, and he looked at Nami. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is that you *eat* people!"

"The sand-brat is joking."

"No, I'm not."

Zoro flicked Gaara's forehead, and the boy stuck his tongue out at him.

"You people are insane." Nami muttered, as she massaged her temples. Suddenly, the ground beneath her swayed, and she started to fall.

Luffy was the one to rush forward and catch her, since he was the closest, and he gently lowered her to the ground. "Are you alright?"

"Don't-don't touch me..." Nami mumbled, but Luffy didn't let her go.

Naruto leaned over her with a frown. He recognized this from when Zoro would have his "training" sessions. "You're exhausted and dehydrated. You need to drink something and rest. Probably eat something too, when you can, 'ttebayou."

Even at the mention of food, her stomach growled. Nami struggled to stand, but her legs gave out. Still, Luffy easily supported her. Everything in Nami was screaming to get away from this guy. But she didn't have the strength to fight him.

"You're alright, Nami." Luffy said with a smile as he turned his head to look at her.

Luffy could feel a swell of unpleasant emotions wafting off of Nami; making the hair on the back of his neck feel itchy. He didn't think she'd appreciate getting dragged over to rest on their ship. He had a sneaking feeling she'd panic – he could feel the panic ready to cut loose.

Instead, Luffy looked around for a different and acceptable solution; he motioned to one of the nearby houses.

"We can stay there for now, there's no-one in there."

Nami couldn't really even protest as Luffy helped her up and swung her arm over his shoulder as support. Luffy simply kicked the door to the house down, announcing, "We're coming in!"

The Captain guided Nami over to a couch and helped her lay down. There were noises in the kitchen, and minutes later, Naruto was handing Nami a glass of water. "You need to drink something, 'ttebayou."

Nami was sorely tempted to knock the glass out of Naruto's hand, yelling, 'I don't accept things from Pirates!' because what if it was poisoned, or something? They would have their way with her before keeping her prisoner or maybe selling her off. If something happened to her, what would happen to everyone back home?

Luffy frowned in mild concern as turbulent emotions raced through Nami. Doubt, worry, fear; suspicion standing out most of all...but the emotions were quelled before long, and Nami grudgingly reached out and accepted the water. She stared at the glass for a second or two before practically guzzling it down, not caring that she dribbled.

"You want more?" Naruto asked the moment she was done. Nami nodded wordlessly.

Naruto made three more trips before Nami's thirst was satiated, and she settled onto the couch. She was so tired. All she could think of was, why? Why were these people being kind? Well...that Gaara kid

was debatable. But the couch was comfy, and she was so *tired*. Tired of this life; always running, always desperate. Working like a slave for *him*.

Nami fell into a dreamless sleep.

After Nami fell asleep, Naruto went to the door and began using a kunai to carve symbols into the door frame. Fortunately, this wood was sturdy enough for it.

"What're you doing?" Luffy asked.

"This is for a Concealment Seal so those guys can't find us..." Naruto explained. He'd have to use some blood and chakra to activate it. "Honestly, it's a bit plain, but it'll do for now, 'ttebayou."

Luffy practically lit up the room with the bright sparkle in his eyes.

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When Nami woke up, she noticed that she was covered with a thick blanket. It was also dark outside, with the barest hint of moonlight shining in. At least the cannon wasn't going off every few hours. The girl slowly pushed herself up into a sitting position. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness around her, she saw that Luffy was asleep in an armchair, Zoro was asleep on the floor; leaning against the armchair, with a few alcohol bottles next to him on one side, and Naruto on the other, leaning against him. One person was missing... she scanned the room; where was –

Nami suppressed a scream when she saw that Gaara was sitting at the foot of the couch, staring intently at her. The Thief took in ragged breaths, trying to calm down her heart that was nearly leaping out of her throat.

"What the hell?!" she hissed furiously.

"I was watching you sleep."

"Oh. Well, okay then. That's not weird at all." Nami fought to keep her voice down. "Why the hell are you doing something so creepy?!"

Gaara's impassive voice responded, "I don't need to sleep right now. Captain asked me to. He was worried."

Nami stood up. Why would that Pirate be worried about her? What

bullshit. He probably had Gaara watch her to make sure she couldn't escape, or something...

"Well, you can stop it now."

"Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom." Nami's voice took on a peeved edge. "Unless you wanna watch *that*, too?"

Gaara looked up at Nami. "Are you scared of going to the bathroom by yourself? I've seen girls go to the bathroom together all the time. Is that why? Wake up Naruto if you want company."

"..."

What.

"What?" Nami was confused, and even more irritated than before.

"Naruto's a girl, sometimes."

Shaking her head at the absurdity of this situation, the conversation, and the boy who was the center of it all, Nami went to do her business.

Gaara was still sitting at the foot of the couch when Nami came back. She threw one of the couch pillows at him. "Go away." Sand suddenly rose up and intercepted the pillow. "Eh?!"

Gaara just stared at her, unblinkingly. Slowly, he moved to another part of the room, but his eyes never left her. What was this kid's deal?!

Nami managed to fall back asleep in spite of the unblinking gaze.

Maybe Gaara was having a bit too much fun tormenting Nami by simply staring at her. She shouldn't have tried to pretend that either Luffy or Zoro was her 'boss'. If she had simply asked for help, then things would have been different. Ichibi did nothing to stop it, and was all too amused by the girl's reactions.

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The next day, Nami was awoken by voices. She sat up and blinked, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes and stretching. Something was cooking – it smelled slightly burned, but it made her stomach growl in anticipation none-the-less.

"We made you breakfast."

"*AHH!*" Nami didn't bother holding back a scream that time. "Would you quit it?!"

Gaara rolled his eyes and walked away to sit at the kitchen table.

"Morning, Nami." Luffy said with a smile. "So, are you gonna join my crew today?"

"I already told you 'no'." Nami snapped, sitting down at the table.

Breakfast was just a few eggs and overcooked ham jammed between two slices of burnt toast. It would be passible. Looking around as she ate, Nami noticed that they had raided the kitchen pretty much empty. Now that she thought about it... looking at the empty boxes and cans that were strewn across the counters and even the floor, there was definitely *more* than what the house initially had had.

"We had to go looking in the other houses for food and booze," Zoro said when he noticed her looking at the stacks of empty food containers. "There wasn't enough to feed all of us."

There were only five of them... how much food did they actually need?

"So," Naruto started, "how're we gonna get that map, 'ttebayou?"

"Kick their asses." Luffy said, as if it were the simplest thing. "Get the map, Nami becomes our *nakama*, then we're off to the Grand Line!"

"I'm not your *nakama*," Nami disagreed irritably. Moving on, "Anyway, we need a plan. I'm willing to have an alliance with you, at least. I want the treasure, and you need me to navigate. Since it's Buggy we're talking about here, he's definitely gonna have high-quality stuff. Help me get that, and I'll lend you my skills. Deal?"

Turning to the others, Luffy asked, "What do you think?"

Zoro shrugged. "You're the Captain."

Gaara glared at Nami for a moment before looking at Luffy. "I don't care, as long as we have a Navigator. Zoro-nii always gets lost, even with a map."

"I don't get lost. Maps are usually shit with directions."

Nami looked at Zoro with disbelief... What did that even mean?

"What about us, though?" Naruto asked. "We kinda need money, too." Naruto started to list off on his fingers, "There's food, we've gotta repair the railing on our ship along with that one part of the wall Zoro-nii broke and the floor from when I crashed through it... we got needs too, 'ttebayou."

"Fine, I'll split it with you 70%-30%." Nami waved her hand. It was a small hurdle, but it was to be expected. Pirates liked money after all; no matter what age they were, it seemed.

Luffy grinned. "Alright, then it's settled. We just need the money to repair our ship, then we can buy all the meat we want! What're you gonna do with your 30% Nami?"

"*NO!* I meant that you guys get 30% and *I* get the rest!"

"That doesn't seem fair." Gaara muttered, taking a huge bite of his eggs.

"Oh..." Luffy scratched his head and frowned thoughtfully. "I could still buy a lot of meat, though..." Luffy gave a short laugh, as he turned to the Roronoa Brothers as he joyfully recounted a tale from his childhood about someone named Ace being mad at him because Luffy had spent nearly 25,000 belli on meat that was supposed to be the best meat ever, because the cow it came from was so very rare. Luffy continued to smile through his tale that the meat he had received was spoiled. Luffy pouted petulantly at the end of his tale, "I ate the whole thing anyway, and didn't even get sick! I certainly taught that bastard a lesson!"

"What lesson could that have possibly taught him?!" Nami shouted, feeling a very large tic mark forming in her forehead.

"I've eaten rotten food too," Naruto nodded in sympathetic agreement. "The store owners back in my home country would overcharge me for the rotten stuff, even though I was the only one to buy it – when they let me buy stuff. As a result, I got a very strong stomach and can eat just about anything. I wonder if my stomach's as strong as yours, 'ttebayou."

Nami felt confused, irritated and out of place in this conversation. She couldn't believe it: the Captain ate rancid meat out of spite; and the Ninja-boy was apparently cheated into buying rotten food. Why wouldn't people let the kid buy from them though? A part of her

wanted to speak up about the atrocities of spending money she would be risking life and limb for so wastefully, and she would take charge. But, she wouldn't be part of their group for very long, so she didn't bother. Let them waste their own money. That thought irritated her.

A dark energy radiated off of Zoro, making Nami nervous and Luffy curious. When Naruto finally returned to Konoha, Zoro was going to find those bastards who cheated the brat. Exactly what he would do to them... Dammit, this wasn't the time to think about that. But for now...

"You brats can buy whatever you want." The younger brothers lit up, and Zoro pointed at them both, "*Within* reason."

The two deflated and pouted. Someone had to be the responsible one. Considering their ship needed maintenance and other minor repairs along with two rapidly growing kids who would need clothing soon along with food, "We'll just make sure to put some money towards necessary repairs and stuff we actually need."

"You're just gonna spend your half on booze, aren't you?" Naruto questioned in a half-hearted accusation. Zoro shrugged in response, not denying it.

"Captain, what do you want to do with your half?" Gaara asked.

"I'll just spend it on some awesome meat... Oh! Maybe if there's some sort of cool charm!" Luffy looked thoughtful as he imagined buying various food related things, along with imagining what could potentially pull his interest away from spending his portion of the money on food.

"You should at least leave some money aside for emergencies and other necessities," Zoro suggested to Luffy. "The rest can go towards food or something else you want."

"Ohh, but I want meat..." Luffy complained childishly.

"Why should we have to fund our Captain's eating habits?" Zoro started to argue. "Do that on your own!"

The conversation and scenario caused a painful twist in Nami's chest and a stinging sensation in her eyes. It was absurd, and obviously different, but... It was like the time that Belle'mere... Luffy abruptly stopped his juvenile arguing with Zoro and looked at her and frowned, for some reason. He seemed to frown a lot whenever he looked in her direction, and Nami couldn't figure out why. He looked concerned –

no, she was imagining it. Pirates were cruel, cold-hearted and especially didn't care about other people.

"Nami, are you alright?" Luffy asked.

She chose to shove those emotions aside. She had to *focus*.

"I'm fine."

Luffy didn't believe her.

Getting the attention of the others, she spoke, "Now that we have that settled, we need a plan for how we're gonna get Buggy's loot. I propose that we pretend to "mutiny" against our "boss" here, and tie him up. We'll present him to Buggy, and I'll sweet-talk him again, and make Buggy think we want to work for him."

"..."

Everyone stared at her blankly for a few moments.

"That plan's *so* boring, though, 'ttebayou!" Naruto whined.

"I would never betray Captain, and I'll never serve under anyone but him." Gaara coldly stated, glaring at Nami as if she had actually suggested stringing Luffy up in blatant mutiny.

"I didn't mean we *actually* betray him," Nami tried to explain, but to no avail. It appeared that Gaara took her idea quite literally and refused to run with it.

"I don't like it." Zoro said with finality. "It's too open-ended, and way too risky."

"I don't really wanna get tied up." Luffy complained.

"Alright, fine!" Nami threw her hands in the air in open exasperation. "What do *you* propose we do?"

Luffy simply grinned and kicked his legs like an eager child. "Kick their asses, of course."

Zoro smirked as he flicked Wado Ichimonji's guard with a thumb. "Now that's an idea I can get behind."

Nami face-palmed.

"Besides," Zoro took a swig of booze, "he probably already knows we're here. Chances are, Enji and the others told him about us. There's also those four who attacked us. They either walked away or got found. I doubt he'll lower his guard, even if you pretended to betray Luffy."

Luffy nodded along. "If I were Bongo, I'd actually try and do something to prove untrustworthy people's loyalty to me. Like making them give up all their meat, or something."

"He has a point, 'ttebayou." Naruto agreed with Luffy.

The Thief hated to admit it, but yes – *both* Zoro and Luffy made points that were hard to argue with.

"It's Buggy," Nami corrected, but that went ignored.

Nami sighed. Slamming her head against the hard surface of the table sounded very appealing at that moment.

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Their small group made their way through the eerily silent town, observing the damage. Various buildings had clearly been vandalized; while others had been the unfortunate site of a cannonball's impact. They eventually reached an area that had mostly been spared the cannonballs going off; although a few buildings had been ransacked and had graffiti strewn across it singing the Buggy Pirates' praises, along with petty insults to their own crewmembers and outside Pirate crews. Passing by a pet store – which was the only building it seemed that had been spared the graffiti and ransacking, there was a small, fluffy, gray-white dog sitting outside of the store that stared at them as they passed.

If it hadn't blinked as it observed the Thief and Pirates, they would have thought it was a statue.

"What a nice doggy!" Naruto said, squatting down and petting the dog. The dog leaned into Naruto's fingers and grumbled contentedly.

"Did you get left behind here, buddy?" Luffy asked as he too leaned down to pet the dog. The dog clearly enjoyed the attention. The dog barked, and glanced back over its shoulder to the pet store behind it.

"Oh, you're guarding it, then!" Luffy concluded, and the dog barked happily in affirmation.

"Shake." Gaara said, putting his hand out. The dog put his paw in Gaara's hand, and the boy beamed.

Nami pouted somewhat, watching the three guys pay attention to the dog. She turned to Zoro to make what was likely going to be a sarcastic comment and how they didn't have time for this, when it died on her lips. Zoro had an expression on his face that Nami didn't think was possible for a guy like him.

"Zoro-nii, look, he shook my hand!" Gaara said excitedly, which threw Nami even more, because of how *childish* Gaara looked just then – his stern, unblinking gaze seemed like another person entirely.

"That's really nice, sand-brat." Zoro replied genuinely with a small smile. Nami started at the expression on Zoro's face just then – like, he didn't even seem to realize that he was making it. He truly cared for the boy. For some reason, it made Nami feel uncomfortable.

Gaara scratched the dog's chin, and he looked at the dog's name tag. "Chou-Chou...nice to meet you."

Luffy suddenly jerked and looked back the direction they had come. He was unexpectedly serious. "Someone's coming."

Barely a minute later, the aforementioned someone came from around one of the houses. Some guy who was riding a giant lion casually strolled towards them. "Well, well, looks like I finally found you, Thief," his eyes wandered over to the others. "Along with your boss and his little friends."

His eyes narrowed at the four Pirates. "You really injured some of our members. I can't let you get away with pulling a stunt like that. It's an insult to the Buggy Pirates."

The lion rumbled in agreement.

The dog immediately went into a defensive position and started barking and snarling. Nami's eyes widened when she recognized Mohji.

Mohji dismounted and reached for Chou-Chou. "That's a nice doggy. I'm just here for these people, so you can back down. I'm not called Beast Tamer for noth-!"

The dog snarled and bit Mohji's hand. He cried out in pain pulled away, and stared at his bleeding hand.

"You kinda deserved that..." Naruto said, reaching for his kusarigama.

Mohji quickly mounted his lion once more. The man looked irritated as he eyed Chou-Chou. "Richie, get rid of that annoying mutt."

The lion raised its paw, claws extended, and Chou-Chou charged forward, determined to protect his master's treasure. Nami screamed when the claws came down. Luffy was quick to grab the dog and pull it out of harm's way. The ground where Chou-Chou had been mere seconds earlier was torn up from the strength of the lion's swipe.

Nami glared hatefully at the man. Pirates took things and destroyed people's lives so casually – not caring who was hurt in the process.

"You weird-hat-wearing bastard, 'ttebayou!" Naruto shouted, springing off of the ground.

Mohji bristled and angrily shot back, "This is my *hair*, you br-!"

The man was cut off when Naruto kicked him in the face. Mohji fell off of his mount and onto the ground with a painful groan. Richie looked shocked.

"YOU!" the man quickly stood up. "Do you have any idea who I am?!"

Naruto gasped in mild alarm. "Did my kick affect your memory?!"

"NO!" the man spluttered angrily, "I'm the Beast Tamer Mohji, and this is Richie – one of East Blue's most fearsome breed of lions!"

"I've seen bigger." Luffy loudly whispered to his crew as he held onto a ferociously growling Chou-Chou. "The tigers from my home island are like the size of these houses, sometimes bigger."

While Richie was big enough for more than one person to ride him with ease, he was still slightly smaller than a good number of the houses.

"Really?" Naruto asked, in wide-eyed curiosity. The prospect of learning various factoids about Luffy's hometown proving far more interesting than the Beast Tamer.

"Yep! I learned how to use my Devil Fruit by fighting 'em." Luffy said with a smile. "There was this one time though, that Ace and I almost got killed by one. But luckily, this guy was there, and he saved us-!"

"STOP IGNORING ME!" Mohji screeched, cutting Luffy off. "Richie!

Attack!"

Richie snarled and charged forward, teeth bared and claws extended. Luffy just looked up at the pair and didn't even bother to move; because he knew that he didn't have to. A kusarigama sliced through the air, followed by a shout of "*Oni Giri!*"

It felt like wind was whipping through the air, but it was concentrated around the kusarigama, making it move in a shaky, curious fashion. The blade sliced across Mohji's chest and a good portion of Richie's mane was cut away. The man screamed and the lion roared in pain as they both fell into a puddle of blood.

Nami only stared, aghast.

The wounds on Mohji's chest looked as if he gone up against a lawnmower and lost, horribly.

"Jerks, picking on people smaller than you!" Naruto huffed, easily pulling his weapon back to himself and near-absentmindedly catching it in his hand, and the wind ceased. It was still a bit too messy, but it was improvement.

"Did-did you kill them?" Nami couldn't help but ask. Not that she cared – but – the people she chose to ally herself with...what if they were cold-blooded killers, just like...

Naruto cocked his head at her. "No. They aren't worth killing, and Luffy didn't order me to, 'ttebayou."

Luffy smirked at Naruto and gave him a thumbs up, "Good job, Naruto."

Naruto chuckled and blushed, scratching the back of his head. Zoro simply reached forward and ruffled Naruto's hair.

"Still a little too messy, but that was nice control, brat."

Naruto couldn't help but beam under the praise.

"What should we do with them?" Gaara asked, motioning to the rival Pirate and his pet.

"With those injuries, they'll have to slink back to their base when they come to," Zoro said. While he couldn't be sure of their endurance, they had gone down in one hit with Naruto using one of his more basic

techniques. They would certainly want to leave and care for their wounds as quickly as possible. "So...we could leave them, or take them with us."

Luffy put a now calm Chou-Chou down, and the dog sniffed the Beast-Tamer and huffed, then promptly turned around to kick dirt onto the pair.

"How about we take them with us?" Gaara suggested, a rather disturbing smile on his face. "I have an idea."

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Yesterday evening...

Buggy was a man who loved shiny things; those things often involved treasure – gold, valuable gemstones –and those things were just the tip of the iceberg. If it had monetary value and glistened in the sun, he was sure to hoard it. If it was in someone else's possession, he found ways that he could steal it or kill the owner – the original owner didn't need it if they were dead, after all.

After that damnable *Red-Hair* had ruined his dreams, he wanted to take all the treasure that he could – on land. His crew was loyal enough, but he didn't trust their judgment to grab only the best of the best pieces – or keep some of it for themselves. It was best that he only trust himself when it came to treasure. Having treasure merely be in his possession was never enough, because he wanted more – *always more*.

But when his crew was willing to give him what they had gathered on their own, he wasn't going to complain. He could pick out the best pieces for himself and then simply give the crew what he didn't want, and act as if it were compensation.

He and the majority his crew all sat out on the roof of their base. They were surrounded by food and alcohol, and at the rate they were going, they would have to raid another town. Buggy fully intended Orange Town to be their permanent base in East Blue for a while, before either moving on or opening another base somewhere else. Another base meant more treasure, but that would mean he'd have to leave some of his precious treasure behind.

It was almost too much to think about.

Just then, three people that had been gone for the past few days ran

out onto the roof. Enji, Craig, and Bruno all burst through the door and collapsed onto the floor.

"Captain!" Bruno spluttered, and the other two were quick to follow.

"Please, forgive our lateness," Enji said, bowing. "We were tricked by a Sea Witch who stole our boat and the treasure that we had managed to gather."

Bruno was speaking quickly now, before Buggy could react to the loss of treasure. "We lucky to survive, and were rescued by what happened to be rival Pirates!"

"One of them knew me..." Enji guiltily spoke before the other two could. "I was forced to reveal that you had a Devil Fruit..."

Buggy scowled, noticeably displeased. "Where are they now?"

"We left them at the dock..." Craig answered.

Twenty minutes later, members of Buggy's crew returned with four heavily injured crewmates. Their Doctor was certainly going to have his hands full, considering their injuries. It was going to be a long night.

"These people should flashily die!" Buggy shouted, slamming his fist against his chair's armrest. "...along with that flashy bitch, Nami!"

This *had* to be her fault, obviously.

"Do you want us to prepare the cannon?" Cabiji asked.

"No... I want them brought here so I can make them flashily suffer!"

His men cheered. Buggy knew that the one way to retain loyalty was all about showmanship. Buggy knew that he wasn't the strongest, so he made himself seem much stronger and more threatening by manipulating with words and injuring various people at the right time. Sometimes, killing them was the only way to get the results he wanted.

"Find them...they still have to be in this town somewhere..."

The men certainly looked, but their search found nothing. For some reason that none of them even thought to take notice of – they avoided one of the houses. The only thing that their search proved was that the original residents were staying away – for now, at least.

And that weird Boodle guy hadn't bothered them for the past few days.

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Moving on to that morning...

Searching for Nami and the other Pirate crew had proved to be a fruitless effort. It was headache-inducing. And infuriating. Buggy glared out at his crew, all of whom were exhausted from an unproductive night of searching.

"How can you not have found them yet?!"

"I...we..." one of his men stuttered. "We don't know... we know that their ship is still here... and well, when Yuta and Robbo tried to go on board, they got injured by some sort of weird traps..."

"WHAT?!" Buggy yelled.

Indeed, Yuta and Robbo were limping their way over to their Doctor.

What was this?

"How can you-!" Buggy was cut off when Mohji and Richie suddenly fell out of the sky.

The Buggy Pirates all stared; shocked and disturbed. The two had been severely injured. Then a shout came from the street down below, "*OOIIII! BOOGER!*"

Buggy felt a tick-mark form on his forehead, as he stomped forward and looked over the banister.

"It's *Buggy*, you flashy bastard!"

Two people were standing there; some kid with an annoyingly flashy straw hat (like *that* flashy bastard) – then – Buggy's eyes widened as his jaw dropped – a redheaded kid with a gourd! No way...from the stories he had heard... *Mad Grin* was *here*?! Damn... that kid looked young. Where exactly had he found a Devil Fruit that rivaled the likes of Crocodile, and how had he mastered it at such a young age? Perhaps, Buggy wondered, the gourd had "eaten" a Devil Fruit that was some sort of variation of Crocodile's? The phenomenon had been known to happen under certain circumstances.

Then, the thought suddenly occurred to Buggy: *where* were the other

two brothers?!

There was shouting behind Buggy, and he quickly turned to see what was going on. Buggy's eyes widened even more in shock when he saw that *Phantom Blade* was attacking his men. How had he gotten up here?! The door was guarded and locked!

Zoro made sure that he wasn't killing them; but he wasn't really holding back, either.

Gaara held out his arm towards the roof of the Buggy Pirates' base, and sand flowed out of his gourd and started wrapping around his outstretched limb. Within seconds, a large sand-hand gripped the banister, and Gaara had Luffy in tow as the boy pulled them towards their opponents with incredible speed.

Luffy landed on the roof with ease, much to Buggy's growing annoyance, and astonishment.

"Hey, Buggo!" Luffy called out. "Fight me!"

Gaara stared at the most blatantly obvious feature Buggy had.

"His nose is almost as big as his face."

"Yeah, you're right, Gaara." Luffy agreed. The other Captain looked thoughtful. "Is that *really* his face, though?"

Everyone who wasn't busy fending off Zoro and overheard the conversation and were aware of Buggy's temper all sweat-dropped and instantly felt sorry for the two. Those who had fallen pretended to have died. They had no idea what they were up against. Captain Buggy would be sure to make short work of them.

"What did you say about my nose?!" Buggy demanded.

"It's big and red...kind of like an infected pimple ready to burst." Gaara replied flatly.

"Flashily die, you little brat! *Bara-Bara Stab!*"

Buggy's left hand wielded three knives and separated from his arm at an impressive speed; shooting towards Gaara's head. Except... Gaara's shield rose up and blocked the attack, and he didn't even have to move a muscle. Buggy's jaw dropped – although, quite literally as it separated from the rest of him in his shock.

The sand quickly wrapped around the knives, and nearly caught Buggy's hand before he managed to pull it away. As his limb reattached itself, a chill went down Buggy's spine as intense sea-green eyes peered at him through the shifting grains.

"Oh, such a shame..." a grin that had no business being on anyone's face much less a kid that young slowly spread over Gaara's lips as the knives were slowly crushed and ground down. Gaara pushed his goggles up over his eyes. "You managed to pull your hand away."

The people watching and hearing the conversation all felt the hairs on the backs of their necks stand on end. That kid... was *insane*!

"You...!" Buggy snarled, not liking how that kid was looking at him like some sort of prey. "If you think you can claim my head, think again!"

"Your head doesn't have to be attached to your body." Casually, Gaara looked over at Luffy, "If I can catch them, can I keep his limbs, Captain?"

"GAH!" Buggy nearly screeched, not liking how this conversation was going. It was like he wasn't even there! The flashy bastards! Thinking they could do as they pleased! He wasn't *too* worried...

"This is my fight," Luffy replied with a grin as he cracked his knuckles. "You can take all their weapons though."

"Understood, Captain."

Meanwhile, Buggy screamed and yelled profanities at the flashy bastards. He would show them what happened when you messed with the Buggy Pirates!

That straw-hat kid and the Roronoa Brothers were rapidly climbing to the top of the list of people he didn't like.

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Naruto followed closely after Nami, making their way through the small mansion. Every now and then, the sounds of fighting could be heard from outside, and their little motley crew was most certainly giving Buggy a run for his money. So far, nothing and no-one had tried to stop them.

Nami was certain that the safe would still be in the office – it was far

too big and bulky to move. The day before yesterday - she had gotten the safe open, found the map and had glanced at it long enough to realize what it was. She had rolled it back up and was reaching for something else when a drunk Pirate wandered in. Nami was ready to take him. Except he was more sober than he let on and with plenty of yelling and fending her off, she had well over fifty angry, drunk and bloodthirsty Pirates ready to tear her apart. She'd had no choice but to drop everything and run.

Now – she had Naruto with her. The kid was definitely skilled, given from what little she had seen yesterday.

The plan was to get the treasure and the map, and try not to get caught.

Apparently not everyone was on the roof partying.

Naruto heard him first, just before they turned the corner. "There's someone-!" Naruto started, but the moment they did, there was a large man who was running towards them. Likely heading for the commotion outside.

He looked more surprised to see them than they did to see him.

"YOU!" a meaty fist shot towards Nami's face.

Before Naruto could act, though, Nami ducked and swiveled on her heel. She pulled out a small bar from *somewhere* on her person and whacked the man across the face, effectively breaking his nose. Within seconds, Nami assembled a Bo staff, and she gave the man several more thwacks – one in the sternum and then the stomach, followed by one across his lower back. She finished by whacking him on the head, as he laid on the floor moaning in pain, Nami quickly undid his sash and tied his hands and feet together, and used his jester's hat to gag him.

Naruto almost felt sympathy for every one of those hits that he heard. They were going to hurt, *bad*.

"Wow, you *can* fight, 'ttebayou!" Naruto praised as they continued forward.

"Why do you say it like it's such a surprise?" Nami grumbled irritably, keeping a white-knuckled hold on her weapon. She was controlling her nerves right now. She had to admit it though: it was a mild comfort that Naruto was there, in spite of his being a Pirate.

Naruto simply shrugged. "Just didn't expect it s'all, 'ttebayou."

"I'm a Thief; not an idiot." Nami stated, as she walked forward with purpose. "My profession means not getting caught and avoiding conflict whenever I can. But sometimes, I *have* to fight my way out." Nami wished there was something for her to kick – there was something satisfying about kicking a rock or a pinecone when you were annoyed. "Last time, if there had been just the *one* drunken idiot, I could have knocked him out, grabbed the loot and ran. But... everything went to shit."

"Ah." Naruto said, not really sure how to reply. "That sucks."

"Hmph, you could say that again."

There was more shouting ahead of them:

"We gotta get outside, *now!*"

"Who the heck is attacking us? The villagers can't be-!"

Two men wearing what looked to be asymmetrical jester costumes quickly exited a room and halted when they saw the Thief and the Ninja. They smelled strongly of alcohol, and one of them was clearly more drunk than his companion; since he was swaying somewhat.

"It's that Thief!"

"Die!"

They pointed their guns at the pair,

"Flying Shuriken!"

Naruto threw several shuriken that struck the drunken pair. They were so shocked at the flying projectiles that they didn't even have a chance to react when Nami struck both of them on their heads and they went down in a heap.

Naruto was starting to develop the opinion that Nami liked hitting people.

Nami took off the sashes and belts they were wearing and quickly tied them up facing each other – with each having their hands tied to the others' feet for as much inconvenience as possible, along with taking their keys just in case.

/ *"Did you just think of that name?"*/Kyuubi asked.

Sheepishly, Naruto mentally admitted, **'Yeah... Sounds pretty cool, right?'**

Kyuubi chose not to point out the redundant yelling for an attack that was supposed to be silent.

Continuing on, Nami indicated a door. "The safe room's this one, here,"

Knowing Buggy for as little time as she did, she knew how paranoid he was when he *wasn't* acting paranoid. The guy loved his treasure; his reputation preceded him. If she had been in his position and had the capabilities, she would set traps if someone had been trying to steal from her. She had been surprised when there *weren't* traps the first time around.

Carefully, she tapped the handle with her staff, making sure that it wasn't rigged. Then, she tried the handle. Locked... Nami scoffed. If there were any traps, then they'd likely activate when the door opened – unless there was a mechanism that could only be deactivated by something in particular. Like Buggy having to disconnect a limb to push a button on the other side of the room. Hell, it could even be as rudimentary as having guards that would shoot on sight anyone who wasn't on their crew.

"Let me," Naruto said, unsheathing his short sword. Concentrating, Naruto charged forward and sliced downwards, *"Oni Giri!"*

The cut was more centralized this time, and the door and the wall were easily cut through. Inside, there was a guard wearing a far too small tank top with the Buggy Pirate's Jolly Rodger and a jester's hat; and he was large enough in both height and size that it was questionable how he had managed to get into the room in the first place. He was dirty and mildly scratched up from the wall's debris.

He narrowed his eyes at the two intruders and swung his oversized cutlass at Nami in particular. "You!"

Nami yelped and dove into a roll and landed on her feet, while Naruto blocked an attack that prevented Nami from losing what likely would have been a good portion of her leg. Nami took in a shaking breath, because she had heard and just about felt how terrifyingly close the irreversible injury had come.

"Take care of the safe, I'll take care of this guy, 'ttebayou!" Naruto said, pulling out his kusarigama as well.

For a moment, she stared. Naruto had helped her... but Pirates *didn't* help people. Shaking her head, Nami set out on completing what she had initially come here to do.

Naruto whirled the kusarigama and swung it towards his opponent, who ended up grabbing it in his large hand and yanked Naruto towards him. Naruto used that as an opportunity to stab the man's shoulder with his sword; using the combined momentum from springing off the ground and the man's own strength against him.

The man screamed, and grabbed Naruto with his other hand and threw the boy at the wall. Fortunately, Naruto was able to twist himself so that he landed on the wall – much to the oversized man's shock – leaving behind a large indent as he sprung off the wall.

The man quickly grabbed the sword that was in his shoulder and threw it to the side, and prepared to attack, but unfortunately his careless treatment of the small sword earned him Naruto's ire.

"HOW DARE YOU THROW MY SWORD SO CARELESSLY, DATTEBAYOU!" Naruto shouted, incensed. That was his precious sword!

"*Fucho no giho!*" Naruto charged forward, improvising the attack with his kusarigama. While normally executed with two or three swords; Naruto's attack was very lopsided and the accompanying wind currents cut through various sections of the building.

Nami would have been elated with relief upon seeing that the safe was still there, except she ended up letting out an '*EEP!*' when the wall above her cracked.

The guard ended up getting cut pretty badly, but now, he was pissed off and he wasn't going down.

Thinking of how trees and rocks crack when too much Chakra is used, Naruto dodged a large hand that grabbed for him. He then used a burst of Chakra in his feet to jump off of the floor and propelled himself into the man's large stomach and applied enough Chakra that would normally shatter tree bark; but not damage the tree itself.

The man let out a painful gasp and held onto his injured stomach; giving Naruto a death glare. Naruto grimaced. Luffy hadn't told him to

kill anyone, and he was holding back where he could. If he-

"You little bastard! I'll kill y-!"

Nami charged in, and whacked the man across the back of his head with her staff. The guard flinched and with an ever-increasing pissed off look he slowly turned his head to glare at Nami – who had ducked down and pretty much shattered his kneecap when she struck his leg with her weapon. The man went down with a scream, only to receive a second blow to the head.

He groaned, and Nami spat, "No-one comes in between me and my money!"

Naruto stared at Nami for a moment, wondering how exactly he should start reevaluating his opinion of her. She *definitely* liked hitting people.

"The safe!" Nami said with a happy sigh. *"Finally*, I can get my treasure!"

After carefully checking that the safe wasn't rigged, she used the combination, and grinned like a Cheshire cat as she pulled out treasure. Nami also pulled out the map and unrolled it to make sure that it was still the same map. Relief filled her. Soon... she would have the funds.

"Wow, that's so much money, 'ttebayou!"

"Yep!" Nami was very happy. "But now we need to carry it, somehow."

Pouting, she added, "I lost my sack the first time." Her gaze then went over to the large man. "Naruto, help me take his clothes off."

"You're kinda perverted, ya know..."

Nami didn't appreciate that comment, and let it be known.

Naruto scowled as he nursed a bump on his head, and helped Nami take off the man's shirt and pants to make temporary sacks. Naruto made a hole in the wall leading out to the street so that they wouldn't have to run through the mansion again.

"I'll take you to our ship, and we can wait for the others there, 'ttebayou." Naruto said, glancing around. He could hear fighting, and knew that his brothers and Captain were busy.

The two started making their way towards the docks.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING WITH MY TREASURE?!" a screeching voice demanded.

Nami screamed and Naruto's eyes widened in shock and sparkly-eyed wonder when the top half of a man wielding large knives in his hands came barreling towards them. Just then, there was a loud boom that seemed to shake the ground itself.

Oh, no! The cannon! Nami realized in horror. Just then, darkness enveloped them.

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"How can you-!" Buggy was cut off when Mohji and Richie suddenly fell out of the sky.

The Buggy Pirates all stared; shocked and disturbed. The two had clearly been injured. Then a shout came from the street down below, "OOIIII! BOOGER!"

Buggy felt a tick-mark form on his forehead, but he stomped forward and looked over the banister.

"It's Buggy, you flashy bastard!"

Zoro stood on the street below, on the opposite side of the building. After tying on his bandana, he unsheathed his swords. With a bloodthirsty smirk, Zoro concentrated on where he wanted to go – the roof of the mansion in this case – and stepped forward.

To say that people were shocked at his sudden appearance would be the mildest of understatements. While Buggy was busy yelling at Luffy and Gaara, Zoro went to work reducing the numbers. He held back, not naming any of his attacks. All he used were the standard training forms for *Demon Cutter*. It was slightly disappointing.

Just then, a man riding a unicycle intercepted one of his attacks, and the fact that he was able to maintain his balance while fending off Zoro was certainly an impressive feat.

"I Acrobat Cabaji, Chief of Staff..." the man started, barely even flinching as he swiveled his blade, forcing Zoro to take a step back. "Will take you on!"

Zoro smirked. "You better not disappoint me."

Cabaji balanced in place for a moment as he pointed his blade towards Zoro. "It's an honor, Roronoa Zoro... to think that I would get to slay you, as a swordsman myself."

Cabaji charged forward, peddling his unicycle rapidly. He swung his sword downwards, and Zoro blocked. Before Zoro could retaliate though, Cabaji called out,

"Acrobat Technique: Old Man Arsonist!"

Pulling down his scarf, a burst of flames covered Zoro's face, and Zoro quickly shut his eyes and protected his face. Taking advantage of Zoro's temporary blindness, Cabaji flicked his heel and a small knife slid out of the toe of his boot.

In that moment, Zoro was completely aware that if he was anywhere near an opponent and he couldn't see, that could very well be the death of him. Zoro quickly took a step back to widen the distance between them, fading only a few feet away. Feeling something wet and warm in his side, Zoro glanced down. He had been wounded... hopefully, the Acrobat hadn't thought to poison his blades.

"Oh? You dodged..." Cabaji blinked a few times, wondering if he had underestimated the distance. He could have sworn that Zoro hadn't even moved. Had he been pushed back? But he would have felt the pedals on his unicycle move if that had been the case. What was going on?

"This is all you got?" Zoro asked as he licked his lips showing his bloodthirst. "I'm not impressed."

Cabaji glared. *"Acrobat Technique: Murder at the Steam Bath!"*

Cabaji spun his sword rapidly, creating a dust cloud.

"Acrobat Technique my ass!"

Cabaji charged forward, fiercely bringing his sword downwards; cracking the roof and the surrounding floor. Cabaji paused for a moment. Roronoa Zoro was gone...how had he-? Cabaji's senses flared when something moved behind him.

"That's just a dust cloud!"

Cabaji turned and ducked just in time; although he lost his scarf and the lower half of his bangs. Cabaji's hand went to his throat, which had narrowly missed being cut, but now he had a bloody gash across his cheek.

How...?

"I'm tired of playing games." Zoro said. "There is too large a level between us."

"I see..." Cabaji prepared himself once more. "I underestimated you. I won't be making that mistake again."

The Acrobat charged forward. *"Acrobat Technique: Windmill Twirling Springs at the Big Top!"*

Cabaji began to peddle rapidly and leaned to the side. He began spinning in circles with his sword ready to slice the legs off of anyone who was unfortunate enough to be in his path. Zoro quickly jumped back and stuck to the wall.

Cabaji balked at the gravity-defying display. "What sort of trick is that?!"

Zoro grinned and got into position. An image of a tiger's head slowly appeared behind him. *"Tora Gari!"*

It sounded like a roar as Zoro charged forward, and Cabaji just barely managed to block it. His muscles strained, and he was sure that if it weren't for his Haki, he would have been cut. Abruptly, Zoro faded out.

But...he was *just* standing there! Cabaji had no idea which direction Roronoa would be coming from. He had to act fast!

"Acrobat Technique: The Dance of 100 Kamikaze Tops!"

Cabaji threw out several spinning tops in every direction, hoping that would be enough to stop whatever attack Roronoa would dish out.

"Stop messing around!" Zoro demanded, slicing several of the tops in half. This was an insult.

"Acrobat Technique: A Hike in the Mountains!" Cabaji peddled rapidly over the balcony and up the side of another tall building and shot up into the air. He made *sure* to keep his eyes on Zoro as he

went. *"Acrobat Technique: Fireworks in the Cool Summer Breeze!"*

"Now he's just yelling nonsense." Zoro griped. Obviously, this idiot wasn't holding out on him. He was just being a nuisance. And here, Zoro was hoping for a challenge.

"Sting of the Unicy-!"

"Enough." Zoro growled out from behind Cabaji. Cabaji paled. How did Roronoa get all the way up here in so little time?!

Before the man could react, Zoro called out, *"Tatsu Maki!"*

A small tornado formed, slicing at Cabaji and sent him spinning down to the ground below. Cabaji groaned as he forced himself up. His tricycle was ruined beyond repair, and he'd have to get a new one. Zoro then appeared several feet from him.

"I really hope you can still fight," Zoro said, raising the swords in his hands.

Just then, a loud blast drew both of their attentions.

"Zoro-nii, the cannon!"

Cabaji's eyes widened as he paled. Zoro suddenly disappeared and was next to his brother in seconds.

Cabaji shakily stood, knowing he would have to take cover. From his position on the balcony, he noticed that his Captain hadn't realized the danger. The Acrobat moved quickly, hating that he didn't have his preferred mode of transportation and hoping he would reach Buggy in time.

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Buggy glared at Luffy. "Why you little... You think you can actually come here and attack me without provocation!"

"Yes." Luffy responded while casually picking his nose.

Buggy's eye twitched. Was that brat insinuating something?!

"I'll kill you! Die flashily!" Buggy shouted, *"Bara-Bara Stab!"*

Buggy's hand disconnected, and Luffy casually dodged. Buggy smirked when his hand swiveled around and aimed for the flashy brat's back.

Luffy simply stepped to the side, without ever taking his eyes off Buggy.

"He dodged it?!" Buggy shouted.

"That was kinda slow..." Luffy muttered before his own smirk graced his lips. "Now, it's my turn."

Luffy charged forward, taking Buggy off-guard. Luffy's fist rammed into Buggy's stomach, and Buggy heaved. The Clown Captain quickly widened the distance between himself and that crazy kid. That hit felt much stronger than the average punch, and from what he could tell of the kid – he was toned but skinny. He definitely shouldn't have been able to deliver a hit like that...

Only one thing for it now, Buggy figured. He would bullshit his way out of this and take the kid out while he was distracted.

"What are you playing at, you flashy brat? Do you know who you've gone up against? I'm Captain Buggy of the Buggy Pirates! Don't think you'll walk away unscathed!"

"Oh, that's good. We're Pirates too. I'm Monkey D. Luffy!" A confident grin graced his lips. "The future King of the Pirates!"

"You?" Buggy scoffed. "As if! If you're the future Pirate King, than I might as well be one of the gods! It's not a simple journey just anyone can take." Buggy spread out his arms as a display of confidence and power. "I'll be the King of the Pirates and gather *all* the treasure this world has to offer!"

"You done talking?" Luffy asked, getting into a basic fighter's stance. "Let's fight already."

Buggy scowled in annoyance as several knives appeared in his hands. "Fine...it'll give me a chance to cut that annoying smirk off your face and that *hat*..." Buggy ground his teeth. "That hat reminds me a little too much of *that* guy... that damn red-haired Shanks!"

"Oh? You know Shanks?" Luffy asked, putting a hand on his beloved hat.

"I wish I didn't! Do you want to know why?"

"Not really..." Luffy muttered. "I'd rather fight."

Ignoring the teen's comment, Buggy angrily recounted his tragic tale of a ruined life and lost treasure, but the only thing that Luffy had gotten from it was:

"Oh! So Shanks saved your life!" Luffy replied happily. "He saved mine too!"

Shanks really was a good guy.

"No he didn't!" Buggy objected. "That's what I'm trying to tell you! He ruined it!"

"So..." Luffy cocked an eyebrow. "Shanks should have left you to drown?"

"GAAAHHH! Forget it! You can't possibly understand my fury!" Buggy roared in his frustrated irritation. "*Chop-Chop Rice-cracker!*"

Buggy's legs separated from him, and spun towards Luffy. Knife blades slid out of the toes of his shoes, ready to cut anyone unfortunate enough to get too close. Luffy easily dodged by jumping up into the air, and Buggy smirked as his hands shot at Luffy.

"You can't move in the air!"

"Yes, I can!" Luffy's arms stretched out towards a pole. Latching onto it he not only dodged, but then twisted himself around to slingshot at Buggy, who clearly didn't expect the maneuver. Luffy's fist drew back, and he tried to punch Buggy. The clown's head quickly disconnected from his body as a way to dodge, and at that moment, Buggy's legs had come back to him.

Buggy flipped backwards, trying to hit the kid with a kick that would result in a nasty stab wound.

Not for the first time, Luffy was thankful for his speed and flexibility thanks to his Devil Fruit. He was able to twist his middle around to grab Buggy's leg and use it as a sort of spring-board. Luffy's eyes widened when something shot for the back of his head. Luffy's other hand grabbed his head to pull it down. It was too close a call; unfortunately, three knives had skewered Luffy's hat and another had cut the string.

"Oh!" Luffy realized it was too late, and he hit the ground. Again, Luffy knew to be thankful, because the way he landed would have shattered his shoulder had he not had his Fruit.

"Oh? What's this?" Buggy taunted, holding up the hat.

Luffy's voice took on a hard edge. "Give that back."

"Who would want it?" Buggy spit on the hat and threw it to the ground. His foot came down within a hair's breadth of it before he noticed the fist aiming for his face. "*Bara-Bara no sickle!*"

Dodging was easy!

Except when the fist for his face was a feint and the flashy brat's second fist hit him in the stomach. Buggy collapsed to the ground, heaving. There was *no way* that kid could have that much strength! Unless... no way... This was *East Blue!* How could... "How can you know Haki?!"

The way the kid moved; his punches, Buggy was forced to admit it: this kid's Haki was stronger than his. Buggy had the basic Armament Haki down, and relied on his Devil Fruit to not get injured.

Luffy ignored Buggy's demand as he picked up his precious hat. "This hat is my treasure."

Buggy winced when hard, dark eyes landed on him.

"F-fool! Everyone knows that treasure is jewels and gold!" Just then, Buggy spotted something behind the flashy brat.

Nami and some blond kid had large bags of... his eyes widened before they narrowed dangerously. Those damn thieves! At that moment, there was a loud explosion that sounded suspiciously like the Buggy Cannon, but never mind that!

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING WITH MY TREASURE?!" Buggy demanded.

Unfortunately, something hit his balls, and Buggy collapsed. He shakily picked himself up and his jaw dropped when Roronoa with that red-hair kid suddenly appeared next to Luffy. Zoro grabbed Luffy and began running.

"Wait, Zoro!" Luffy protested, "I'm not done fighting Buckaroo!"

"It's Buggy!"

His protest went ignored as the three suddenly faded out and appeared next to the thieves.

An injured but still alive Cabaji was suddenly next to him. "Captain! We have to protect ourselves!"

Thankfully, there were a few crewmembers willing or not, who could protect them as the cannonball hit.

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Gaara was put out because everyone else seemed to have something to do: Nami and Naruto were going after the treasure, his Captain was fighting the other Captain, and Zoro was fighting some guy who rode on a unicycle.

All Gaara could really do was take care of the stragglers; and grab up their weapons for his own. Some of them did try to fight back, but none of it was a challenge. It wasn't fair. If he had known it was going to be like this, he would have volunteered to go with Nami – even if she wasn't his favorite person.

One man named Kenny stared fearfully at Gaara, realizing that *none* of their attacks even came close to hitting him! It was like the sand had a mind of its own, since the kid hadn't even reacted to their attacks. The kid was no longer grinning, and he looked entirely apathetic as he simply slapped that oversized hand of his around and grabbed up their weapons with tendrils of his sand.

Then, Gaara's attention fell on Kenny.

Kenny whimpered.

But...he was one of the Buggy Pirates! They wouldn't be defeated here! Kenny threw his sword at Gaara's feet, and Gaara cocked his head at the action. What was this man trying to do with such a useless action?

Kenny then threw several daggers that either missed Gaara completely or got caught in his sand. A few daggers flew by Gaara's head. Since there was no chance of the knives hitting *him*, his sand didn't react. Although, Gaara heard several ripping noises right by his ear. He paused in his advances for a moment and inspected his scarf...

Gaara nearly gasped at the several large tears in his beloved scarf.

"You... my scarf..." sand whirled around Gaara like a storm. "I'll grind your bones into dust!"

Whimpering and panicking, Kenny raced over to the cannon – desperate times, desperate measures – and no-one could possibly survive this! The Buggy Cannon was feared for a reason. Fortunately, there was still a cannonball inside, just waiting to be fired.

Kenny lit the fuse and using his strength, swiveled the cannon to face Gaara.

"Take this, you brat!"

At first, Gaara figured he could simply catch the cannonball in his sand, and be done with it...except... looking at the cannon though, he commented, "I haven't seen one that big before."

"*That's what she said*,"\ Ichibi's laugh chimed in, and Gaara rolled his eyes.

Behind him, Zoro was still fighting the unicycle guy, and Luffy was fighting Buggy on the ground below. It was then that Gaara realized that there wasn't a guarantee of the cannonball's impact not hitting any of them and blasting them into hundreds of bloody pieces.

Gaara reached the cannon just as the wick finished burning, and whacked the mouth of the cannon upwards the moment it fired, as hard as he could, sending the cannonball skyward. Gaara finished by hitting Kenny over the head, sending him to the floor in a heap.

(He may also have taken one of the man's hands as reimbursement for his damaged scarf)

But of course, whatever goes up, must come down. Gaara turned on his heel and yelled at Zoro, while pointing up, "Zoro-nii, the cannon!"

Zoro glanced up and his eyes widened ever so briefly at the realization of where that cannonball was going to land. So forgetting Cabiji for the moment, Zoro focused and quickly faded over to where Gaara was and grabbed him up to carry him under his arm.

"Luffy!" Zoro shouted from around his sword as he raced towards the younger teen. Zoro faded out, making sure to cover Gaara in the correct amount of Chakra before fading in next to Luffy.

Luffy gaped at Zoro in awe and pleased surprise – because getting to see that was *awesome*. Now that he thought about it; that was *just* like – Zoro grabbed Luffy.

"Wait, Zoro!" Luffy protested, "I'm not done fighting Buckaroo!"

Who cared about that stupid bomb, he would be *fine*!

"Not now, Luffy! We have to protect ourselves!"

Meanwhile:

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING WITH MY TREASURE?!"

Buggy was charging towards the two thieves who dared to steal *his* treasure, when suddenly Zoro appeared in front of him. Before Buggy could question how Zoro had managed that when he had just been on the roof with Cabiji just moment ago, that damn Straw Hat and his crew were encased in a sphere of sand as an explosion shook the air and sent Buggy flying.

Buggy landed on the ground in a disgraceful heap, and thanked his lucky stars that his lower half was still intact. His legs had unwittingly been shielded by the worst of the hit when they had been forced to follow him due to his range.

He watched as Cabiji rose out of the wrecked building, holding onto an unconscious (or very likely dead) crewmember, looking annoyed.

Over with Luffy's crew, the sand lowered around them, returning to Gaara's gourd.

"W-what?" Nami stuttered in disbelief.

Somehow... Zoro was *right there* next to her, appearing out of *nowhere*; and Gaara's sand had protected them from the blast. This was insane!

Her voice squeaked out, "How?"

"Questions later, run now, 'ttebayou!" Naruto was grabbing her arm and pulling, while simultaneously holding onto a large bag of treasure that quite frankly was too big for him to carry but he was managing.

"You flashy bitch!" Buggy shouted, charging at Nami through the dust cloud, and Nami dropped her treasure to grab her staff, getting ready to stop Buggy. No way could she win... but then Naruto was in front of her, with both kusarigama and sword in hand.

"Don't worry Nami!" Naruto didn't even think twice about protecting Nami, simply because she needed it and she was going to be their Navigator by Luffy's own decree – whatever the Captain says, goes.

For Nami though... she couldn't help but wonder in that moment, 'why?'

Buggy suddenly paled and dropped to the ground, painfully muttering, "M-my balls..."

The clown painstakingly turned his head to look over at his legs, and balked at the sight of Luffy kicking his manhood.

"Y-y-you f-flashy bastard..." Buggy shakily floated up. He waved an arm in a dramatic fashion to emphasize his accusation: "You added Haki to that kick! Stop hitting me there!"

Luffy's voice was cold and serious. "Leave my *nakama* alone."

Buggy charged forward, throwing several knives at Luffy to make him get away from his legs. Luffy easily dodged, and Buggy's legs ran off. Buggy spread out once again, making hitting him difficult.

"Hurry up and go, both of you!" Zoro ordered, quickly intercepting a strike from Cabiji. "Gaara, go with them!"

Cabaji couldn't let this go so easily. He swung his sword and Zoro simply met the blow with his own swords. There was a groan of steel, and Cabaji frowned as Zoro smirked. His sword...it was going to break. He could already see the cracks forming.

"*Akuma no Gijutsu no Tsume!*"

Zoro forced his way forward, slicing both the swords in his hands horizontally. The sword in Cabaji's hand broke in half and the rest of the attack struck Cabaji in the chest and shoulders. He groaned and collapsed to the ground.

Zoro sighed as he looked down at the guy. He would live as long as he got medical attention within a few hours.

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Gaara wanted to protest leaving, but decided against it. Instead, he turned towards Luffy and called out, "Captain, make sure Zoro-nii doesn't get lost!"

Luffy gave a thumbs up accompanied by a sparkle of assurance. "You got it!"

Zoro spluttered indignantly. He *didn't* get lost!

Meanwhile, Gaara formed a large hand so that he could carry both of the makeshift sacks. Nami glanced over to where Luffy was fighting Buggy. They didn't have time for this!

"Listen you two, I have a plan to stop Buggy."

"But Captain said that he doesn't want us interfering with his fight."

"Yes, but," Nami smirked and held a finger erect, "we aren't interfering with Luffy's fight; we're interfering with *Buggy's*."

Naruto's eyes sparkled as he grinned. "Oh! You're *so* smart, Nami, 'ttebayou!"

"I guess you have a point," Gaara admitted to Nami. "What are we going to do?"

"Do you have any rope?"

Naruto pulled out one of his scrolls and Unsealed a rope, causing Nami to temporarily gape at him.

"How did you...? Never mind. Let's take care of Buggy while Luffy's distracting him." Nami said as she took the rope and motioned for the two to follow her. "And Gaara, don't let anything happen to my treasure, got it?"

"I hope to ruthlessly crush the hands of anyone who is foolish enough to try." Gaara deadpanned.

Even though she inwardly shivered at the thought, Nami nodded in approval. "Be sure that you do."

It appeared that Buggy couldn't exactly pay attention to where his legs were in proximity to the rest of his body. That, or he simply broke apart and had his limbs run around amidst the confusion while the opponent dealt with fighting him.

"We're going to grab his parts and tie him up." Nami explained.

"Are you *sure* you aren't a closet pervert?" Naruto asked.

Nami swung her fist at the boy. "Stop calling me that!"

Seconds later, Naruto was trying to sooth a growing bump on his head while he curled into himself.

"Ow...you're so mean, Nami, 'ttebayou!" Naruto tearfully whined.

While Gaara didn't like that Nami had hit Naruto, he had to admit, "You kind of deserved that."

Kyuubi laughed.

Naruto pouted.

"Okay, get ready..." Nami whispered. She didn't like counting on these two, but at this point what choice did she have? "Both of you grab his parts and hold them down while I tie them up."

"Yosh!"

"Okay."

Buggy split apart once again as he called out, "*Bara-Bara Festival!*"

"Now!"

As tempting as it was, Gaara resisted the urge of crushing Buggy's limbs and simply willed his sand to wrap around the floating arms and torso and carry them over to Nami. Naruto tackled Buggy's lower half, and while doing so, accidentally hit Buggy's manhood for what had to be the fifth time that day. The Ninja-to-be winced in sympathy and quickly brought the legs over to the Thief who expertly and efficiently tied the stray limbs together.

Over with Luffy and Buggy, the clown's head suddenly collapsed to the ground moaning in pain. He had to get his parts back! Buggy summoned his limbs...

"Eh?" Buggy blinked a few time before processing that everything was much bigger and his body just didn't feel right.

Luffy stared amusedly at Buggy who was nothing but his head, hands, and feet.

"Looking for these?" Nami asked impishly, giving Buggy's parts a soft kick.

"MY PARTS!"

"Hurry up and finish this guy, Luffy!" Nami called. "I want to get out of here already!"

Before Buggy could do anything, Luffy was stretching his arms out behind him, with a wicked grin on his face.

"Of course! *Gomu-Gomu no...ROCKET!*"

Buggy was sent flying into the air, and disappeared into the horizon followed by a twinkle.

"Man, that jerk was annoying! He insulted Shanks and," Luffy held up his beloved straw hat, "he wrecked my hat!"

"I hope he at least lands on an island..." Naruto said.

"Can I use his parts for materials?" Gaara questioned his Captain, already uncorking his sand.

Before Luffy could answer, someone shakily protested,

"L-leave t-the-the Captain's p-p-parts alone, you-you...you monster!"

A few of the Buggy Pirates crew members had survived the cannonball, and now were desperate to retrieve their Captain – and escaping from *these* people was a priority!

"Gaara, wait."

Luffy stood tall amongst the rubble, although he couldn't help but brush his fingers over the damage to his hat.

The Buggy Pirates shivered and were relieved. They all froze in mild fear when Luffy's attention was turned on them.

"You really should get out of here," Luffy's tone was dark. "Pirates who steal the homes of others don't sit well with me. If you don't leave now, I'll let Gaara take Bambi's limbs."

In Luffy's mind – yes, they had "borrowed" a house and the food from other houses, but they hadn't driven people out of their homes; and they weren't actively destroying the town – taking in the sight of the destroyed mansion – at least, not intentionally. They weren't attacking the residents of the town, either.

Not liking the way Gaara's face lit up at having access to new materials, the Buggy Pirates grabbed Buggy's parts; their wounded and even their dead; because the deceased deserved a Sea Burial, and the crew made a hasty retreat.

"I didn't get to keep any of his limbs..." Gaara sulked. Naruto gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder.

"Who knows what his Devil Fruit could have done?" Zoro reasoned and comforted with practicality, "His bones might have ruined the whole stock."

"At least I was able to get that one guy's." Gaara sighed, pushing his goggles back around his neck.

Despite the absurd and morbid conversation, Nami was staring at Luffy in surprise and confusion. Luffy's voice had been strong and clear: *"Pirates who steal the homes of others don't sit well with me."*

Even though she had been staring at him, Nami unintentionally flinched when Luffy turned towards her and smiled – in his usual, carefree way and spoke to her.

"You got all the treasure, Nami?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Well, that's great! Let's get it all back to our ship."

Both Luffy and Zoro easily lifted the makeshift sacks, and with Naruto leading the way, Gaara took hold of Zoro. Nami walked behind them. This didn't sit well with her for various reasons, and those reasons made her all the more wary. Sure, these Pirates skated on a thin line that made up a morally gray area, but they had helped her. They didn't take advantage of her. They rescued a *dog* of all things. Naruto had had her back the entire time they were in the mansion.

These people were...something else.

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After her beloved treasure had been put away in their storage, Nami observed as Luffy sadly (and almost worriedly) messed with the holes in his hat. Even Gaara's clothing hadn't escaped unscathed. The boy was looking at the slits in his scarf with a mildly disappointed and irritated look as if the tears would magically patch themselves together.

He held his scarf out to Zoro, "Zoro-nii, can you fix my scarf again?"

"Go get the sewing supplies." Zoro said, settling down and taking the

scarf.

Gaara quickly went to do as he was told, and came back mere moments later with a small sewing kit.

"Oi, Zoro..." Luffy hovered over the older teen's shoulder. "Think you can mend my hat, too? Makino used to do that for me..."

"Sure, I'll take care of it as soon as I finish the sand-brat's scarf."

"He also managed to cut the string, the bastard." Luffy griped.

Zoro began mending one of the gaping holes in the scarf, and Nami frowned. Zoro was doing a terrible job of it. A memory of a red-haired woman mending a dress – Belle'mere was passable as a seamstress; it was clear that she had the knowledge and not the skill. But it was good enough that their clothing lasted as long as it did. Later on, Nojiko had taken over the task, being much better at it than their mom. Belle'mere had simply sighed and shrugged in defeat and let Nojiko do what she wanted.

Belle'mere's skills had been tending to her beloved orange trees. She was someone who could make anything grow. Even the most stubborn of plants bended to her will...

Nami forced her mind back to the present.

"Um, excuse me." Nami spoke up, getting the attention of the Pirates. "But...I can mend the scarf and the hat if you like... no offence, Zoro-kun, but..." Nami trailed off, not sure that if she continued, she would insult the people who could still easily do something to her. Even though, they probably wouldn't. "Your sewing skills leave a lot to be desired."

Zoro glanced down at the crooked and messy patch-job he was doing; and sighed. He definitely looked annoyed, but he didn't argue.

"...Fine, here."

Nami took the scarf and sat down. She ignored how Gaara sat next to her, and he seemed to be scrutinizing her work. Nami gently undid the crooked mending job that Zoro had done, and quickly went to work. She could tell that Zoro had done his (quite frankly, shoddy) mending work more than once. In fact, the thread didn't always match the scarf, and he must have used whatever had been on hand at the time. Some of the thread that had been used was bright red or a horrid

bright orange.

A finger slowly traced over one of the previous patch jobs. A lot of care had been put into fixing the scarf when it was necessary.

"...You're really good at this. Zoro-nii's sewing isn't like yours."

Nami paused to look at Gaara. Had he just actually complimented her?

"Well, I've just had a lot of practice," Nami replied practically. "I've just got a more delicate way of doing it. Your brother's hands are more suited for heavier work."

"If you become our Navigator, we won't get lost and Naruto won't have to be eaten." Naruto heatedly interjected something about him *not* being on the menu, but that went ignored. Gaara looked thoughtful as he added, "Zoro-nii won't get lost, Captain will be happy, and you can get your treasure."

Nami couldn't help but grimace. "This is just a mutual agreement between me and your Captain. What's with you and eating people, anyway?"

Gaara shrugged and replied in an all-too-serious voice. "It's funny."

"Hmm," Nami moved on to the next hole. "Why are you barefoot?"

"I don't like how shoes feel. It's like they're eating my feet. I had sandals before, but I out-grew them."

That was some interesting logic. So the kid had opted to simply not wear shoes? And Zoro didn't enforce anything and simply let Gaara do as he pleased?

A peaceful sort of quiet soon surrounded them, with Zoro snoring and Luffy sitting at the figurehead, contentedly dubbing it his, "special seat".

Naruto was cleaning his weapons. He thought about the fight with that oversized jester. The technique was terribly off-balance, and he had been lucky that Nami hadn't gotten hurt. It was like a bird trying to fly with a broken wing – no – a *clipped* wing! Naruto's fingers touched the earrings in his ear.

"I need something else to balance the technique, 'ttebayou" he

muttered.

/ **"What are you thinking?"**/ Kyuubi asked, mostly because he was curious and to see the kit actually sit down and think was a rarity.

Naruto lifted his kusarigama. "I think I need another one of these, 'ttebayou."

/ **"Are you serious?"** / Kyuubi's voice was incredulous. / **"I don't think I've ever seen anyone wield two of those blades before – aren't they already sort of two-handed? You're just mastering the one. You really want to add two to the mix?"**/

"I can do it." Naruto insisted. He just had to go about it...somehow. He used Wind Jutsu and a few *Sword Spirit* and *Demon Blade* techniques with his blades. But he wasn't a master, yet. Naruto could easily picture himself wielding two kusarigama, and he looked pretty freakin' cool!

/ **"Alright, if you insist."**/

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Nami insisted on having her own room, but Zoro just snorted and said, "If you're so worried about privacy, we'll just put a sheet around the area you want to sleep."

Since the Thief was a "guest" on *their* ship, and any available space was used for storage and wasn't suited for sleeping; none of them saw any reason *they* should be kicked out of *their* room.

Naruto led Nami into the cabin where everyone slept. "I guess you can take the bed," Naruto shrugged. "Or the floor. Zoro-nii sleeps on either one," motioning to a section of the floor by the wall, "and Luffy slept over there last night."

The cabin wasn't exactly messy; but it wasn't exactly clean, either. It was organized chaos with a layer of dirt in some places. "We really don't mind sleeping on the floor,'ttebayou."

Looking around, Nami noticed a picture on the desk against the wall: a happy couple standing with a kid wearing some sort of face mask and wild white hair who had a serious expression. The man had smiling eyes and he had an arm around a very pregnant woman who was grinning playfully at the camera.

"Those're my parents," Naruto said when he noticed where Nami was looking. "Mom was pregnant with me. And that's Kakashi. He's kinda like my brother too...but..." Naruto smiled somberly. "He couldn't take me after my parents died. But he asked Zoro-nii once he had the chance, 'ttebayou.'"

"Oh...I'm sorry..." Nami said quietly. The fact that Naruto had a picture of his parents while his mother was pregnant with him and not one *after* he was born... she could only assume that something had happened where the family had never gotten that chance.

Something at the tail end of Naruto's story stuck out to her. This Kakashi guy couldn't take Naruto in for some reason... but asking Zoro to do it indicated a level of trust towards a dangerous guy that certainly seemed like a great deal of risk that must have been worth taking; perhaps that guy must've felt there wasn't any other choice. But it was also a disheartening fact that something must have happened to Naruto's town – his earlier comments about having to buy rotten food, and his being a Pirate and Bounty Hunter wasn't exactly something he had chosen.

It was because he also didn't have any other choice.

Like...kind of like her.

But the difference was that Naruto proudly carried 'Roronoa' as his family name and Zoro undoubtedly cared for both Naruto and Gaara.

"We'll tie up ropes right there and there," Naruto said, bringing Nami's attention back to him. "We have some spare material for the sails, so that'll work as walls, 'ttebayou.'"

Silently, Nami helped tie the ropes in place, and they threw the sail material over the ropes. It would certainly give her the privacy she desired. Sort of. It would be fine, as long as none of them saw...

"I bet we can make shadow puppets." Naruto said excitedly, bringing Nami's attention back to him once again. Dammit, she shouldn't be spacing out around these people! "Oh! Gaara could make *amazing* puppets by manipulating his sand. We could play a game, 'ttebayou!'"

Naruto ran out of the room, ecstatic with his idea about shadow puppets and Gaara's sand.

Subconsciously, Nami's hand went up to her left shoulder. It was

almost envious how Naruto could still be a child.

Nami scoffed. Pirates stole childhoods. So why... Her gaze slowly went to the wall that had various papers haphazardly pinned up; they were faded somewhat due to age and exposure to salty air. They consisted of childish drawings of three people and sometimes some sort of odd creatures that looked like an outlandish raccoon, and a fox with way too many tails.

Nami squeezed her shoulder. A voice in the back of her mind harshly wondered why did Naruto and Gaara both get to keep their childhoods.

Excited chattering broke through her thoughts; Nami quickly composed herself just as the guys entered the room.

"This is gonna be great," Naruto was saying, "Nami! We're gonna be on the same team!"

"How come you get to decide that?" Nami muttered, but didn't protest. Hopefully this silly game would distract her from her thoughts.

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Hours after Buggy's defeat and the Straw Hats' departure...

Mayor Boodle came to check on the damage – and of course most importantly of all, Chou-Chou. That dog was as stubborn as his late owner, and absolutely refused to leave the store behind. For some reason, Buggy had been firing his cannon two nights ago – and then it went off again just hours earlier. Although it pained him, he couldn't risk heading into town when things were so dangerous.

Walking through the cobblestone streets, Boodle noticed the various ransacked and blown apart houses...they would have to repair them, if they ever got the chance. When Boodle rounded the corner that led to the pet shop, he stopped short in shock.

His jaw dropped at the sight of blood, and a lot of it.

"Chou-Chou!" Boodle cried out, running towards the pet shop. He slammed the door to the shop open. "Chou-Chou!"

"Aru?"

Boodle glanced down and saw the dog exiting the pet shop. Chou-

Chou took his usual spot and scratched his ear and resumed his stoic position.

"You're alright..." Boodle smiled in relief as he reached down to scratch the dog behind the ears. "I'll get you a bit of food."

With Chou-Chou settled, Boodle went to take a look around the town. He carefully peeked around corners, and only left them once he deemed that it was safe. It was far too quiet, he noticed. There wasn't drunken yelling or music; just the sounds of crying seagulls and the ocean. For reasons unknown, the calm silence was more unsettling than the raucous sounds of Pirates.

But looking around the town, there didn't seem to be anyone – he balked and then sighed as he took in the sight of his wrecked – well, more like completely demolished house... there was blood there, too. But no bodies.

It seemed someone had come in and driven the Buggy Pirates out. Boodle wondered who their mysterious saviors had been. Within that same hour, Boodle joyously ran to tell the villagers the good news about the Pirates being gone; and work to repair the town soon began. The people didn't complain. They were relieved, to be sure; because everything would be fine. Orange Town was a place that consisted of resilient people.

As Boodle was cleaning up the wreckage from his house, he glanced down, and noticed something amongst the rubble of his former abode.

"Hmm?" reaching down, Boodle picked up an odd, white, star-shaped thing – of which he was sure was made out of bone. It was crudely made; being uneven in the size of its points. Even so, Boodle nicked his finger showing how sharp this odd weapon was. It glistened in the sunlight as if there were bits and pieces of metal in it. Did this belong to their mysterious savior? He hadn't recalled any of the Buggy Pirates having something like this.

Boodle carefully put the object into his vest pocket, making sure he didn't cut himself again.

There was an entire block of houses by the docks though, whose owners were definitely curious about who had come along and driven Buggy away. That entire block had the doors of their houses broken down and their homes raided for food. It didn't really matter to them, because nothing of true value that couldn't be easily replaced had been taken.

Boodle and the rest of the villagers wished they knew who to thank once they were done.

The Mayor of Orange Town had his suspicions one day many months later, when he was reading a newspaper and an article about the Straw Hat Pirates came up – and one Roronoa Naruto and his slew of weapons was mentioned. Boodle nearly busted out laughing, because these Pirates had been in the news more than once; not because of their Piracy, but because of their defeat of other Pirates and the threat that they posed.

Boodle cut out the article and pinned it to the wall in his office. If the residents of Orange Town wondered why their Mayor insisted on saving all the articles and wanted posters of the Straw Hat Pirates over the months, they didn't question it.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter kept growing and growing. Hope people like long chapters, because I do.

A hint at the past, Luffy expresses his faith in Naruto and Gaara's skills more than once, Naruto is flattered, Gaara is pleased, Nami questions her sanity, Buggy is gone for now, and Orange Town is finally at peace.

How many times can Luffy get Buggy's name wrong on purpose??

The Coward Realizes he cannot run; the Liar who stands tall will protect that which he loves!

Chapter Summary

Luffy and his crew end up at Syrup Village; somewhere in the Gecko Islands. While there, they meet Usopp, son of Yasopp - and Luffy wants him to join their crew. But when a nefarious plot involving Usopp's friend Kaya and the entire village comes to light, Luffy challenges Kuro of the Black Cat Pirates for the sake of Usopp.

Chapter Notes

Boys will be boys. Also, don't do anything to warrant an older brother's wrath.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Everyone made their way into the cabin, and after settling in, Gaara allowed his sand to flow behind the makeshift wall along with a lantern while the others sat by the wall.

"Nami and I are gonna kick your asses, 'ttebayou." Naruto said with all seriousness before grinning and informing Nami, "Usually it's just Zoro-nii and me. Even though it's a challenge, I usually win at guessing what Gaara's shadow puppets are."

"Oh, what do we win?" Luffy questioned excitedly.

"Bragging rights mostly." Zoro answered as he settled down and laced his fingers behind his head. "Good luck...you'll need it."

Nami wondered what was so impressive about these shadow puppets that Naruto took the game so seriously and Zoro was wishing them luck.

"Here's the first one." Gaara said, as sand flowed out of his gourd and formed a... Nami had *no idea* what it was supposed to be. It looked like some sort of blob with teeth...

"Oh, a rhino!" Naruto called out, making Nami wonder how on earth he could even think that the blob even remotely resembled a rhino.

"Oh! It's a walrus!" Luffy declared so resolutely that Nami wondered how on earth Luffy came to the conclusion that that thing was a walrus.

Gaara gaped at Luffy for a moment and slowly let his sand flow into nothing for the moment as he nodded. "Yes...it's a walrus."

The next one came up, and the process repeated itself:

"It's a boat!" Naruto shouted out.

"It's a duck!" Luffy declared without hesitation.

It was a duck... Nami's eyes slowly traced over the various drawings on the wall behind them. After several rounds of trying to guess what the blobs of sand were, Nami began thinking that she could easily pick out what drawings Gaara had done. She simply had to go for the absurdly abstract.

Annoyed, Naruto poked her. "You have to guess, too, ya'know."

Nami blinked at the blob behind the curtain. "Um...a lion?"

"It's a sunflower!" came the joyous shout from the winning team; half of which was asleep – or at least was pretending to. There was a sense of satisfaction when Luffy excitedly poked Zoro in the ribs because their team was winning. Zoro grumbled and cursed under his breath about being woken up.

"You suck at this game. I want a new partner, 'ttebayou." Naruto muttered, giving Nami a disappointed scowl.

"It's not *my* fault this guy can guess whatever those ridiculous shapes are!"

"How is this hard, Nami?" Luffy asked genuinely before he frowned. "Are you an idiot?"

"You're the last one who gets to say that!"

Nami pointed an accusing finger at Zoro. "*He* didn't even guess anything!"

"Because I didn't have to," came the simple reply only because Luffy kept poking him in his exuberance.

"I'm too tired for this." Nami sighed. A part of her was questioning her

choices at that point.

Gaara was looking at Luffy with an expression of admiration and renewed respect. While Zoro could guess what Gaara's creations were much faster than Naruto and was hardly ever wrong; Luffy had been able to guess right every time and much faster than anyone he had ever known.

"This was an awesome game," Luffy said with a satisfied smile, although he had to add thoughtfully, "I think you should make your sand shadows harder to guess next time, Gaara. It was so easy. Although I guess you went easy on me and Nami because we're beginners."

"Oh-oh...okay." Gaara had a small smile on his face from the praise.

Nami muttered under her breath about the ridiculousness of this whole thing and settled into her role as Navigator, looking for the next island.

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Later that day, Zoro went through the kitchen, divvying up their meals, and planning future ones. Odd... he could have sworn that there were more sandwiches. This would only last them for the rest of the day and tomorrow.

"With Nami here, our meals will have to be a bit smaller," Zoro said, as he handed Nami a sandwich. "At least we have that large bird..."

He sat down with a bottle of alcohol for his lunch.

"Seriously?" Nami said, eyebrow raised. "Alcohol at this time of day?"

"Not hungry," was the simple reply.

At the mention of less food and Zoro not eating, Naruto scowled at his sandwich before turning to Luffy, contemplating what he was going to say.

The Captain was more than happily enjoying his food – it was barely enough to satiate him – and maybe he could sneak more of the food... worry from Naruto suddenly washed over him, along with resigned annoyance from that invisible person.

Speaking through a mouthful, Luffy questioned, "Hmm? Naruto?"

"Luffy..." Naruto looked up at Luffy imploringly. "Whenever... whenever our food starts running low, Zoro-nii starts 'training'..."

A burst of annoyance from Zoro caused the hair on the back of Luffy's neck to tingle.

"Brat, that doesn't—"

"Hmm? Training?" Luffy interrupted after he swallowed, feeling that this was important.

"Zoro-nii won't eat and calls it training." Gaara said almost accusingly, as feelings of guilt and worry emanated from him as well. "He makes sure that *we* eat...but...he almost passed out before...more than once..."

Zoro scowled at Naruto and Gaara as if they had revealed some sort of deep, dark secret.

Luffy's frown deepened, and some sort of sad feeling seemed to wash over Nami as her own eating slowed to a stop, and she stared at her sandwich. A slightly guilty feeling settled in Luffy's gut when he had thought nothing of taking some extra food. If Zoro wouldn't eat because he didn't think there was enough food for everyone...

Wordlessly, Nami grabbed a knife and cut what she hadn't bit into of her sandwich in half. She then shoved the plate over to Zoro. "You need to eat something."

"This is fine, I'm just—" Zoro started to argue, his pride and stubbornness rippled off of him.

"Just eat the damn thing, you ass!" Nami snapped and she started eating the last half of her sandwich with angry zeal.

"Fine." Zoro relented. He began eating slowly, glaring a hole in the table in front of him as if he were pouting.

Luffy's appetite slowly waned. It was a Captain's job to take care of his crew. He would be willing to miss a few snacks and not eat as much as he would like if it meant that his crew would be happy and not starving.

"Zoro..." Luffy said, sounding serious. "I want you to eat whenever everyone else does. You can't be the best Swordsman without food." Luffy grinned, "No worries; we'll find a Cook and then we can eat

whenever we want!"

"You make it sound like food just appears out of thin air..." Nami muttered under her breath. There was annoyance, but she wasn't angry. Not that much, anyway. Pensive, mostly.

Both Naruto and Gaara were relieved and happy. Amusement that wasn't Naruto's settled around the boy; and curiosity that wasn't Gaara's settled around him.

Zoro sighed, looking put-out at having his sacrifice be revealed. "Yes, Captain."

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Late that evening, Nami couldn't sleep. Too many dreams and memories prevented her from getting any rest leading up to the date just a few days from now. She quietly stepped out from behind the sail wall, to see that Naruto had curled up against Zoro's side and was drooling on him. Zoro had one arm around his swords, and the other was wrapped around Naruto. Luffy had drifted away from his cot to snuggle against Zoro's other side.

It was cute, in an absurd way.

Noticing that their blankets had been kicked off, Nami gingerly replaced them, making sure each of the guys were covered. It was a cool night, after all.

"Meat~" Luffy muttered as he snuggled simultaneously with the blanket and Zoro. Zoro, who seemed used to having two people cuddle with him easily adjusted himself with Luffy without waking up once. Nami found herself smiling a little. It was a shame, really. If Zoro wasn't a Pirate, he probably would have been an amazing guy that she could see herself becoming friends with. The drinking buddy that Genzo would simultaneously disapprove of and ask to keep Nami safe and out of trouble.

When she walked out on deck, Nami noticed that she wasn't the only one there. Gaara was sitting at the base of the mast with some sort of ball in his hands.

"Do you *ever* sleep?" Nami asked, furrowed her eyebrows as she slowly approached him.

Gaara glanced at her for a moment before turning back to his ball.

"Only once or twice a month for a few hours. I'm the best one to keep watch."

"That's in *no way* normal or healthy!" Nami burst out in shock, but managed to keep her voice low enough as to not disturb the others.

"I guess. Before... a long time ago, I didn't sleep."

It wasn't a satisfactory explanation. It was hardly one at all!

But Nami was far too tired to ask or argue. She sat down about a foot away from Gaara. She noticed that the ball in his hands had a curious sheen to it. He was running his hands over the smooth surface in a near-hypnotizing fluid motion.

"Are you making a mud ball?"

"Carving."

It didn't look like any sort of carving technique that Nami had ever seen, but what about any of these guys was normal? They sat in peaceful silence for a while, and Nami enjoyed the feeling of the rocking of the waves. Soon, she would be able to get enough treasure to...

"Hold out your hand."

"Hm?" Hesitantly, Nami did as she was told. Unfortunately, her stupid, traitorous brain didn't provide her with an excuse as to why she shouldn't. She had seen what Gaara's sand could do to people's limbs, what if he was...

Something cool, smooth and metallic fell into her palm. Stray grains of sand seemed to crawl across and away from her hand. It was a just slightly crudely made silvery charm and was abstract in its appearance and was a little bigger than a gold coin.

Gaara wouldn't look at her as he muttered, "You said you liked oranges, right? It's a thank you for mending my scarf."

So it was an orange, then? It was hard to tell at first unless you really looked at it. If anything, Nami would have said it was a strangely shaped bird contorting itself. The leaf was its beak and the twig was its tail.

As for Gaara, he didn't want to be in debt to the girl; especially if she

was just in some sort of partnership with them, and even if Luffy was excited to have her there in any capacity. Plus, being on good terms with her would ensure that she would lend her much-needed skills to them.

Nami stared. Her gaze went from the charm, to Gaara, and then back to the charm. "...Yeah."

There was something special about the charm. Nami smiled, a bit sincerely. Although, it was bittersweet. Who would have thought that Pirates could be *nice*?

"It's really nice, thank you, Gaara."

"Hmm." Gaara turned his gaze skywards, looking at the stars.

Nami stared at the pendant in her hand. "Hey, Gaara? How can you control sand like you do? Is it a Devil Fruit like Luffy?"

Looking very serious, Gaara replied, "A Sand Demon was Sealed into me when I was a baby," leaving Nami to stare at him incredulously. Then Gaara frowned, furrowing his brow. "I could never eat a Devil Fruit."

"Fine, don't tell me..." Nami sighed.

"But I did." Gaara murmured.

Nami thought that these people were weirder than she initially assumed.

Again, silence took over. But it wasn't awkward; it was merely an odd sort of peacefulness. Nami's thoughts went over the events of everything that had happened since she made this deal with the Pirates... Luffy who was somehow kind and had an unnerving ability to notice when something was bothering her. The Roronoa Brothers – Zoro, who sacrificed like any loving family member would...he had elements of Belle'mere and it was all *wrong* – because Pirates *weren't* supposed to starve themselves so others could eat. Pirates *weren't* supposed to care about others. Pirates *weren't* supposed to laugh at absurd shadow puppets.

"Um...are you crying?"

Nami gasped. A few tears had indeed spilled over. Nami silently berated herself for showing weakness in front of a Pirate, even though

it was just Gaara.

"Do you want me to ruffle your hair? Zoro-nii does that whenever Naruto or I am upset about something." He looked reluctant to do that. Gaara brightened a little as he added almost hopefully, "Or he flicks our foreheads...would a flick to your forehead make you feel better?"

"Eh?" It was...amusing. Nami snorted, before she started giggling.

Gaara could only stare as the Thief went from crying to giggling in a span of about eight seconds. He was forming the opinion that girls were weird. Her laughter subsided in another eight seconds.

"You're an odd kid, Gaara-kun."

"*You're* odd."

"Heh. Brat."

It was a start.

Somewhat.

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Luffy sat on the skull-like figurehead and stared out at the horizon as he tried to *think*. It made his head hurt. But he hated how the thought ate away at him. The Captain simply couldn't deny the fact that Zoro had done that weird-but-super-cool-sliding-disappearing-technique... just like *him*... Zoro's was different, somehow; but it was the same. Like the same meat cooked two different ways.

"I wonder if Touma knows Zoro..." Luffy wondered to himself.

"Land-ho!" Nami's voice interrupted Luffy's thoughts.

Luffy immediately sprung to his feet with a grin on his face. Time for an adventure!

The island was covered in forest, and the sounds of insects and birds sounded from the trees.

"Food and adventure, food and adventure~" Luffy sang in a tune that he made up. "We eat our fill, and eat again~"

"Is that even a song?" Naruto asked.

"I like the tune." Gaara said.

\ **"Great."** \ Ichibi grumbled. \ **"That dumbass tune's gonna be stuck in my head for fuckin' days."** \

Gaara smiled at Ichibi's oncoming misery, the little brat.

"This is a good spot as any," Zoro indicated. "Brat, Unseal the bird."

Nami's jaw dropped and Luffy's eyes sparkled when the bird appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Well, we should pluck it so we can cook and eat it, already." Zoro stated, and Luffy agreed – even using his Captaincy to needlessly order everyone to help.

That started the crew on plucking the bird and Gaara collecting the desired feathers for his "art". When they were done with that, Zoro used a move where he simply slashed through the air several times before a portion of the bird was cut up.

"Now you, brat." Zoro nodded his head towards the last half of the bird.

Naruto took out his kusarigama, and started spinning it. Focusing, because this was all about timing; he began slicing sections of the bird with small, Wind-Chakra blades, only releasing the wave when the kusarigama was in the desired direction of the bird. He didn't want the wind blades careening off behind him to accidentally cut Luffy or Nami. Even so, Gaara had positioned himself in front of Luffy and Nami just in case.

"That was really good control." Zoro praised, ruffling Naruto's hair. "It'll be impressive once you're able to control the larger bursts of wind."

Naruto beamed.

Luffy babbled excitedly.

Nami stared at the ground, wondering and doubting.

Gaara paid attention to his feathers.

When cooking the bird came up, Zoro was essentially shoved aside because Nami for one, did not want to eat what pretty much amounted to burnt leather – though none of the others had voiced any

complaints.

"I can't believe you are so hopeless," Nami scolded irritably as she took over cooking. Honestly! She scowled when Zoro shrugged.

"I made it work when I had to." Zoro groused when Nami's eyes narrowed a glare at him. "I ain't a cook."

"That much is obvious. A food arsonist is more like it." She turned the bits of meat over in the pan, trying to busy herself without letting her thoughts think of Belle'mere trying to make it work. Dammit. She unnecessarily stabbed at piece of meat.

'Pirates don't care about people,' she told herself like a mantra. 'They only care about themselves.'

But Zoro cared about those two boys and Luffy cared about his crew.

A part of her wondered if she could ask for their help. But the stubborn pride-filled part of her squashed that idea down. She almost had all the money, it was just a bit more. She could deal with this problem on her own. It will have been seven years three days from now.

Pirates only cared about themselves and didn't help anyone. But...

But Luffy had caught her when she fell.

But Naruto had prevented her from losing a limb.

But Gaara had given her a small trinket and seemed to comfort her in his own odd way.

Pirates weren't supposed to care about people.

"Oh, cool!" Luffy shouted, thankfully distracting Nami from her racing thoughts. "It's a lion that looks like a horse!"

Gaara cocked his head. "I'd say it's more a horse that looks like a lion."

Sure enough; there was a horse with a bushy lion's mane and a lion's tail. It stood frozen for a moment, as if it had been caught. The creature seemed to wonder if it could run away and not get chased, judging by how its eyes darted from them and to the forest.

"Hey, we could eat this one too." Luffy happily suggested, his mouth watering.

The horse-lion sweat-dropped, and tried to subtly scoot away.

That was when a voice called out, "Don't you eat any of my animals!"

A bush inside of a crate with Human-like feet waddled into the clearing. The bush spoke angrily, "If you try eating any of my precious animals, I'll skin you alive!"

The five of them blinked a few times before shouting out in realization: "A talking bush!"

"How is it talking?" Gaara wondered if someone had been Sealed inside of the bush. Although, perhaps not, since Sealing didn't seem to be a thing outside of the Elemental Nations.

"How cool!" Luffy said elatedly, running up to the bush. "What kind of bush are you?"

"I'm not a bush, I'm a Human!" the not-bush spoke irritably. "Anyway, keep your filthy hands away from my animals! They are my friends, and I won't have you upsetting them!"

"Oh, sorry, sorry!" Luffy said, putting his hands together in apology. Straightening up, he then asked, "So, who're you?"

"The name's Boxman."

Once everyone introduced themselves, they invited Boxman to join them, and settled down for lunch. Boxman provided plenty of fruit and vegetables, which Nami accepted eagerly and made sure to put some aside for future meals while at sea.

"How did you get stuck in a box?" Gaara asked.

"It's truly a tragic tale..." Boxman replied with a tear in his eye. "I ended up falling into this box when I tried catching up with my former crewmembers when I woke up from a nap. They ended up leaving me behind, likely thinking I was dead when I didn't return to the ship at the allotted time."

"So they just *left* you?" Naruto sounded horrified. "Why didn't they at least search the island for your body, 'ttebayou?"

"I...I don't really know."

"Maybe they didn't like you." Gaara suggested. "You do smell funny."

Both Boxman and Nami balked, and Zoro saw no reason to argue with the fact. Naruto made a face that showed he at least agreed with Gaara, but wasn't going to say anything else.

"It's not that bad once you get used to it," Luffy attempted to comfort.

"Then it must have been his personality."

A dark cloud hovered over Boxman.

"Gaara, stop depressing him!" Naruto scolded.

"Well, maybe you'll feel better if we get you out of that box!" Luffy moved to pull Boxman out, but the man quickly protested.

"Stop! If you do that, my body's likely to fall apart after being stuck in here for so many years!"

Luffy stopped immediately, although Boxman felt the eyes of a certain redhead staring at him. He shivered at the expression on Gaara's face.

"I wonder what your gelatinous limbs look like."

"Sand-brat, stop scaring the poor guy."

Boxman could only be so subtle as he scooted away to widen the distance between him and Gaara.

In Luffy's mind, Boxman was still very much a bush – his green hair had twigs and leaves in it, along with matting together so fiercely, it would likely take teamwork on Naruto and Zoro's parts to cut through it. There was also more than one bird's nest. He didn't look very Human even though he still felt it. Perhaps spending so much time here alone, Boxman had lost aspects of what made him Human. Not in the emotional sense – rather, physically he had become one with the surrounding flora.

"Hey, do you poop?" Luffy asked, throwing everyone off-guard with the absurd question. Because he had never heard of a tree or a bush that pooped.

"*How* do you poop?" Naruto followed up.

"What do you do *after* you poop?" Gaara asked.

"W-what?" Boxman spluttered, a tinge of red on his cheeks. His hair caused the blush to stand out even more.

Before Zoro could berate the others for asking such ridiculous questions that he never would have thought of or even wanted the answer to had he even thought of them, he stopped and thought for a moment about what exactly Luffy and his brothers had asked. His gaze slowly went down to the bottom of the crate that housed Boxman.

Zoro's thoughts went from 'does he still have trousers on and does he just go' to 'is he bare-assed under that crate' and the expression on his face was one of disturbed disgust and cursing the three who caused him to think those things in the first place.

Zoro's thoughts were likely very clear to everyone, and Boxman's face was beet-red.

Nami whacked everyone on the head; although with Gaara a wall of sand and a glare were all she earned for her troubles. She ignored the insults, complaints and sea-green glare thrown her way and nearly screeched, "Don't be so crude! Seriously! *Boys!* How can *all* of your minds be so far in the gutters?!"

Awkwardly moving onto other subjects, they learned about the animals that inhabited the island: a dog-snake that Luffy said was a snake that looked like a dog; a cat-owl that Luffy said looked more like an owl with cat features...

This went on with every odd animal on the island to a point that made both Zoro and Nami wonder if Luffy was an idiot or if he was doing the entire thing on purpose because of the annoyed reactions it garnered from them. Luffy laughed at Nami's irritated outburst about what one animal looked like, and she would have sworn up and down that there was a smirk in his expression. But it was gone before she could call him out on it.

"I'm afraid that we need to get going," Nami said finally, having something of a time-limit that only she was on. "If it's alright with you, Luffy. It's best to stay ahead of the weather."

She could feel the prickly sensation of rain in the air, subtle as it was. Being ahead of the storm was always favorable.

"Hmm," Luffy nodded.

They said their goodbyes to Boxman and his assortment of animals, all of which now wore some sort of feather necklace. Although, Boxman was decorated like a tree during a winter festival with numerous

feather trinkets.

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On one of the Gecko Islands that were located somewhere in the south-west region of East Blue, there was a particular village where homey and close-knit people lived called Syrup village.

Usopp was a brave warrior of this village; at least that was what he told everyone and the three young boys, Ninjin, Tamanegi, and Piman who consisted of his Usopp Pirates, sincerely believed that he was. The other villagers were debatable; although Kaya probably believed him too – or she was just entertained by the idea.

"Pirates! Pirates! *Piiiiirates!*" Tamanegi cried out as he ran towards his friends and Captain.

"What? Pirates?" Usopp questioned, immediately straightening.
"Where?"

"At the coast!"

"Men! We're off to battle!" Usopp gulped. "Lead the way, Tamanegi!"

"Yes, Captain!"

The boys readied their wooden swords and followed after their leader who was shaking in his boots.

At the coast, the Usopp Pirates stayed hidden behind several bushes where they could see the Pirates, and hopefully, the Pirates couldn't see them. While the ship didn't have an identifying Jolly Rodger, it *did* have a creepy looking figurehead – a large Human skull with chipped wings coming out of its base and what looked to be crossed sabers, but the tip of one had broken off at some point. Pirates were known to hide their flag so no-one would think to raise an alarm. That could very well be the ploy these guys were playing.

Several people walked out onto the beach. Three people around his age or a bit older, and two... *kids*? Usopp wasn't sure. But he nodded to the three boys with him and they nodded back as they gripped several ropes that were connected to a mechanism concealed within the bushes.

"Here I go..." Usopp took a deep breath and stood up. "Halt right there, foul Pirates!"

All five of them stopped and stared at him.

"I am the great Captain Usopp, and I have a hundred-million men at my beck and call. If you agree to leave peacefully, I will show mercy!"

Several flags bearing the Usopp Pirates Jolly Rodger popped out of the bushes. In total, there were nearly forty of them.

Usopp smirked at the expressions on the Pirates' faces. They must be so terrified~

"A hundred million men?!" Luffy shouted. "That's amazing!"

"Really?!" Naruto said, drawing his kusarigama out. He smirked eagerly. "Bring 'em on! I wanna test my skills!"

Gaara stared up at him with wide, raccoon-like eyes. "How is it possible to fit that many people on an island this small? Unless..." he slowly turned towards the water. "They are a legion of all the drowned sailors waiting to drag us down to watery deaths..." he looked up at Usopp, who was entirely befuddled at the response. Being very sincere, he added, "That's the only rational explanation."

"How is *that* rational?!" Nami demanded.

"Y-yeah...yeah!" Usopp was nothing if not adaptable.

"That's *exactly* what they are! Fear my undead-drowned army!"

"He's obviously lying," Nami said with mild annoyance, abruptly cutting off the charade.

"Did you seriously believe that?" Zoro asked incredulously.

"Ohhh..." Naruto slumped. "You bastard, I wanted to fight people, 'ttebayou!"

"You actually *don't* have an undead army?" Gaara looked genuinely disappointed, and Usopp somehow felt that he should be insulted.

"There's only four people up there." Luffy pointed out, now that the disappointment of not seeing an undead army had passed.

Usopp balked, wondering just how this guy knew exactly how many of them there really were. "I won't let you take another step!" Usopp turned to the trio that was with him. Whispering harshly, he ordered, "Run away you three!"

His three followers all teared up. "Captain..."

They quickly ran away, holding back the tears of their Captain's noble sacrifice.

In order to look more intimidating, Usopp marched over and stood on a stump next to the edge of the small cliff where he could tower over the five Pirates. He lifted a leg and stamped down on a remaining branch of the stump and shouted, "If you want to take this village, you have to get passed meeee-!"

Usopp screamed when the dirt holding the stump in place finally chose that moment to come loose; after so many years of playing on that stump, Usopp didn't think this was how he was going to die. Done in by the tree stump of his childhood.

The drop wasn't actually that far, and Usopp hit the ground feeling fairly panicked and relieved that he was still alive. The most he suffered was several scrapes; along with a bruised tailbone and a bruised ego. He blinked a few times and gasped.

The Pirates!

"Hey, are you alright?" the blond kid leaned into his field of vision.

"He's not bleeding or gasping for air, and no bones are poking out, so he's fine," the redhead contributed as he too leaned in to look down at Usopp. Although, Ichibi felt that perhaps one should not judge a person's injuries by what Zoro could walk away from or simply sleep off.

"No, I'm dead!" Usopp tried to insist, but to no avail.

"Quit being so dramatic," the green-haired guy grumbled as he grabbed Usopp's arm and pulled him to his feet which pretty much forced him to stand.

Looking at the Pirates now, Usopp had to admit that he felt some form of mild embarrassment after that little display.

"So, you're a Pirate Captain?" Straw Hat guy asked as Usopp brushed himself off.

"Of course! I'm the best Captain there is this side of the Blues!" Puffing his chest and with his shoulders back, he introduced himself, "I'm Captain Usopp!"

"Usopp?" Luffy repeated. That name sounded familiar. "I'm Monkey D. Luffy, the future Pirate King!"

"Nami."

"Roronoa Zoro."

"Roronoa Gaara."

"Roronoa Naruto!"

"So what are Pirates doing here?"

Luffy hummed happily. "Exploring."

Nami rolled her eyes. "We're gonna need to get some supplies."

Usopp scratched his cheek and he had to ask the two youngest, "So you guys are Pirates too?"

"...Yes."

"Yeah!" Naruto said proudly with a grin. "I'm gonna be the best Ninja in the world, 'ttebayou!"

Usopp's eyes lit up for a moment as he looked at Naruto. "You're a Ninja?"

"Yep!"

"I've never met a Ninja before! Hey, can you do those shadow clones?"

The grin on Naruto's face fell and the others looked on as Naruto sulked underneath a cloud of misery. Naruto poked the ground and muttered bitterly, "It's not *my* fault those damn clones are so difficult to make, 'ttebayou..."

"Sorry...?"

"Ne, Usopp," Luffy looked at him expectantly, and hopefully this would distract Naruto from his downcast mood. "Is there someplace here we can eat?"

"And get booze?" Zoro asked lazily.

"And not too expensive!" Nami demanded.

"Uh, yeah. I'll show you!" Usopp then turned his attention to Naruto as he led the way.

"I've fought Ninjas before, you know!" Usopp said with flourish. "In fact, there was a guy who was as stubborn as a cockroach who wouldn't die no matter how many times he was killed!"

"I didn't think there were any Ninjas in East Blue." Gaara pointed out. "I thought you said you'd never met a Ninja."

"Oh, oh, my good man," Usopp wiggled a finger. "There's a *huge* difference between *meeting* someone and *fighting* them."

"How could this guy be killed and not die?" Naruto wondered, looking up at Usopp with wide eyes.

"That's a frightful tale that will make you shake in your boots!" Usopp said dramatically. "It all started on an island in North Blue..."

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Upon not being able to find their Captain where they had left him, and with the stump being gone and at the bottom of the cliff, the three boys asked a villager if she had seen Usopp. Now, hearing that Usopp had accompanied strangers to the town's restaurant, horrifying thoughts of whatever the Captain must be going through went through their minds. It certainly didn't help things when they shared their nightmarish fantasies with each other. It terrified them even more, and solidly convinced them that Usopp was indeed in terrible agony.

Ninjin, Tamanegi, and Piman all took deep breaths before bravely marching into the restaurant to save their Captain.

Luffy patted his bloated stomach. "Ah, that was some good meat!"

"Eh? M-meat?" Ninjin asked in a small voice.

"Where's Captain?!" Piman demanded as much he dared to, in spite of shaking with fear.

Zoro smirked as he slowly turned towards the boys. "Your Captain... was eaten!"

Nami laughed at the boys' distress of course, but that changed the moment the boys all screamed, "*AHHHHH! Onibaba!*"

"Why are all of you looking at *me?!'*" she screeched.

"He...he wasn't enough." Gaara said, his gaze steadily landing on the boys. "I want more."

Ninjin felt something grab his ankle.

A raspy voice from below whispered, "I think you'll be my next meal."

All three boys looked down to see a version of the red-haired kid with an eerie smile and a cracked face looking up at them from under the table. One of its sea-green eyes turned black and yellow and it licked its lips.

The screams that followed had everyone in the kitchen coming out to see what had happened. Even people who were minding their own business well outside of the restaurant jolted at the screams and wondered what was going on. The three boys burst out of the restaurant so fast, it was a near blink-and-you'll-miss-it moment.

Anyone who saw the boys running and screaming thought that surely the boys were playing another one of their games and shook their heads at the idea of Usopp filling their heads with nonsense.

That caused Luffy and the Roronoa Brothers to burst out in laughter, and even Nami was laughing – although, she tried to be mature about it.

"That-(*ha*) that (*ha,ha*) was mean!" But it was worth it, for that reaction. She laughed harder and more genuinely than she had in a long time.

Suddenly, Luffy's hand slammed onto the table, jerking everyone's attention to him.

"Usopp!" Luffy shouted and ran out.

"Wait, Luffy!" Zoro threw down several belli and he and his brothers ran after their Captain. Nami wasn't far behind, thankful that she didn't have to pay the bill where these guys were concerned. She had noticed that Zoro had only paid for his own bill, along with his brothers'.

All of them ate and drank absurd amounts. *Seriously*, Luffy was one thing; he could stretch. And how much could Zoro drink and *not* get drunk? But *both* Naruto and Gaara ate their fill in an absurd amount. Simply saying that they were 'growing boys' wouldn't cut it.

"Where are we going?" Nami finally asked once she caught up.

"You're asking that *now*?" Zoro shook his head. "I'm following that idiot so that he doesn't get lost."

A derisive snort was heard from Naruto which earned him a dark glare from Zoro.

"We're going to find Usopp," Luffy explained simply. He *knew* that he knew Usopp! Well, not directly. But still.

Meanwhile, Ninjin, Tamanegi, and Piman all were running around screaming about cannibals, Onibaba, monsters, and the fate of their poor Captain when Tamanegi ran right into Usopp.

"Captain!" the trio blubbered, much to Usopp's confusion. "We thought you were dead! We thought you had been eaten!"

"What?"

After calming the hysterical trio down with promises that he was fine and very much alive and not eaten, Usopp made his way towards Kaya's house since it was getting to be that time of day.

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Luffy closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to remember what Usopp had felt like. Fearful, but with so much determination and a thirst for adventure that it overshadowed the fear. It was something like that.

"*YOU!*" a trio of voices called out. Three boys stood on the path further ahead and glared accusingly at them.

"You're the ones who lied about eating Captain!" Tamanegi exclaimed.

"That wasn't very funny," Piman griped.

"Captain is *our* liar! He's the *best* liar!" Ninjin declared.

"Yeah, that's Usopp, right?" Luffy said with a smile. "I'm looking for him. You know where he is?"

"Why?" Tamanegi asked suspiciously.

"I wanna talk to him about something." Luffy said excitedly. "There's something I gotta ask him."

Ninjin looked at Luffy for a moment before replying, "Okay."

Soon enough, they were standing outside of a fence that guarded a large mansion – likely the biggest house on the island.

"Captain's in there," Piman said, and just as he was saying, "There's a place we can get in over there,"

Instead of waiting to be directed, Luffy vaulted over by stretching one of his arms and he wrapped the other around their three guides; and Zoro simply grabbed his brothers and Nami, stepping forward. Before she could even ask, they were suddenly on the *other* side of the hedge. Nami blinked owlishly. Just...just...what? *How?* Whatever. It was best not to ask, at the risk she didn't get a clear answer and a headache for her trouble.

The three boys gaped at the Pirates, but they just followed the voice of Usopp. It seemed answers weren't going to be given.

They found Usopp sitting in a tree facing a window where a pale, young woman smiled at the gallant tales of Usopp the brave who faced a terrifying foe.

"Hey, Usopp!" Luffy made himself known, nearly causing Usopp to fall off of his perch in his surprise.

"Luffy! Everyone!" Usopp managed to not take a second disgraceful tumble that day. "What're you doing here?"

"Looking for you." Luffy replied with a grin. "I wanted to ask you about your dad."

"My dad?"

Something rippled over Luffy, causing his hair to stand on end. He stiffened, and slowly straightened, looking around for the threat. He felt something that he didn't like – it was an unpleasant feeling that made him feel disgusted.

"Luffy? You alright?" Zoro asked, when he noticed the dark expression on his Captain's face.

"Just..." Luffy frowned, not really knowing how to describe the unsettling feeling. "There's something here."

"Should we be worried?"

"I don't know yet. But I don't like it."

"What is going on here?" a voice demanded.

Everyone's attention turned to a butler who stood not far from the corner of the mansion. He reached up to straighten his glasses with the heel of his hand.

Instinctively, Naruto placed himself in between the butler and the others. He pulled out his kusarigama, and a snarl was on his lips. Dark whispers reverberated within him, and everything about this man was screaming *threat!*

/ ***"That man is dangerous... there is blood on him."*** / Kyuubi snarled. This was a dangerous Human. He seemed so unassuming, but he had blood on his hands with no remorse. Those were the Humans to watch out for.

Ichibi laughed. \ ***"Well, well, well... what have we here? A Human who revels in chaos? How cute."*** \

Gaara tensed up and bits of his sand started flowing around him. This man was a threat. Gaara actually let a growl escape him, and it took Zoro grabbing his collar and pulling him back and physically holding onto him to prevent Gaara from tearing that man to pieces.

"I will *not* allow such hoodlums encroach upon Kaya-sama," the butler said coldly. He looked over at the blond kid and the redhead. One part of him questioned if the two were even a threat and if he should be concerned; but another much larger part of him shoved that concern aside. These were just mere *children*. He had to raise a brow at the redhead who growled at him. The green-haired teen holding onto the brat was glaring at him and a hand was on the white sword at his hip.

"You should at least put a leash on your little...pet."

"Klahadore!" Kaya reprimanded.

Luffy felt how tense and angry both Naruto and Gaara got. He could feel the bloodlust radiating off of Gaara and the hatred that the other person with Naruto held the moment the butler made himself known. This man... Luffy glared at him. Everything about this man screamed *dangerous* but he covered it so well.

This was not a man to be trusted.

Klahadore turned a cold gaze onto Usopp. "Should the son of a washed-up Pirate think himself to be on the same level of someone as esteemed as Kaya-sama?"

"What did you say about my dad?!" Usopp demanded, leaping out of his tree with impressive deftness. "Yeah, my dad's a Pirate, but he's *anything* but washed-up! I'm *proud* to be a son of a Pirate! One of these days, I'll set out to sea just like him!"

Klahadore shook his head, and Luffy felt the malicious pleasure the man held for his own words. "It's a shame your mother died, before she could prevent that sort of nonsense filling your head-!"

Usopp reared back a fist and punched Klahadore in the face. Causing both Naruto and Gaara to stare at Usopp with surprise and growing respect.

"*Shut up!* You don't know *anything!*"

"Usopp-san! Klahadore! Please stop!" Kaya shouted before going into a coughing fit.

That got Usopp to stop, and Luffy put a supportive hand on his shoulder.

"Kaya-san? Klahadore-san?" another voice spoke up, and a man with sheep-like features joined the first butler. He eyed the group of people, and frowned at Naruto having his weapon out and Gaara, who was outright glaring and growling at Klahadore, who was still lying on the ground.

His right hand hovered by his belt, and Zoro caught the edge of a flintlock pistol hidden by his butler's coat. His voice was firm and had just the mere edges of a warning. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you all to leave. Kaya-sama isn't well."

"Oh, yeah?" Naruto pointed at Klahadore. "That guy's a dick-face! He insulted Usopp's dad, 'ttebayou!" Clenching his fists, he shouted, "If *anyone* should leave, it's *that* bastard!"

"Naruto, enough." Luffy ordered, and Naruto whirled around looking ready to argue, but the startlingly serious expression on Luffy's face discouraged the idea.

Various people had reactions to the insult, but Usopp shrugged off Luffy's hand and marched away. Luffy glanced over at Klahadore,

before motioning to his *nakama*, "Let's go."

His crew and the three boys quickly trailed after him without a word.

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Once they were far enough away, both Gaara and Naruto visibly calmed down.

"I want to rip that man's spine out." Gaara said, glaring at the ground. "Can I rip his spine out, Captain?"

Piman, Tamanegi, and Ninjin all gawked at Gaara, because they could tell how serious he was.

"Maybe. But no promises." Luffy replied. "We don't wanna go around killing people pointlessly you know."

Luffy frowned in Nami's direction, when she gasped and some sort of emotion – sadness mostly, hit him.

"Nami?"

She just shook her head.

Mild annoyance from the invisible person with Gaara rippled over Luffy. \ ***"Fun-sucker. We could totally fuckin' get away with it. There wouldn't even be a body."*** \

"Didn't that guy look familiar, though?" Naruto asked, trying to recall just where he had seen the man before. Internally, Kyuubi shrugged.

/ ***"I have no idea. He has a forgettable face."*** /

"Naruto's right," Zoro said, gripping Wado Ichimonji. That, and the fact that he used Naruto's given name showed how serious he was taking this. "There is something familiar about that four-eyed bastard and I don't like it."

"Then we should stay away from him if we can avoid it, huh?" Luffy muttered, although it was clear he wasn't happy about it. Klahadore set him on edge, and seeing how Naruto and Gaara and the invisible people acted, it probably wasn't a good idea to seek the guy out just to see why he was dangerous. If he was a bodyguard, it would be understandable. Bodyguards were supposed to set off warning bells. But the way he talked to Usopp – it pissed Luffy off.

Luffy sighed. "I'm gonna go find Usopp. You guys can have some fun, if you want."

"Time for a nap, then." Zoro said, walking off to the side of the road to settle down.

"What? *Here*?" Nami asked disbelievingly.

"Why not?" Zoro sat down and promptly settled back against a wooden fence that lined someone's farm. "You need to learn to relax."

After rolling her eyes, Nami sat down on the fence.

The boys all settled down next to Zoro, and after a moment or two of thought, Piman asked, "So, how long have you guys been Pirates?"

"Like, three days?" Naruto looked at Gaara.

"Pretty much."

"Only three days?!" the Usopp Pirates shouted.

This was truly an impressive thing!

Further down the road, an odd figure was walking backwards...

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Luffy found Usopp sitting on the edge of a cliff, overlooking the ocean. His posture was hunched, and waves of anger and humiliation hovered over him.

"Hey, Usopp." Luffy sat down next to him.

"Oh. Hi, Luffy." Usopp sniffed and rubbed his eyes, futilely trying to hide the fact he was crying a bit.

Luffy chose not to comment on it, and instead asked, "Your dad's Yasopp, right?"

Usopp jerked up to look at Luffy. "You-you know my dad?"

"Yeah, I do. He's on *Red-Hair* Shanks' crew as their Sniper. He's totally awesome!" Luffy grinned and felt very pleased with himself as Usopp's mood slowly lightened. "He showed me a bunch of shooting tricks, and he also told me about you. He's really proud of you, ya'know."

"He is? I...I want to be Pirate like him someday..." Usopp smiled wistfully. "I want to go out to sea and become a brave warrior."

"Hmm? That so?" Luffy grinned as he put a hand on his hat. "Shanks gave me this hat and I promised him I'd become an amazing Pirate by the time we met up again on the Grand Line." Luffy took off his hat for a moment as he looked thoughtful. "If you joined my crew, you could see your dad again."

"You're inviting me to join you?" Usopp asked in shock.

"Yep!" Luffy popped the 'p' as he replaced his hat.

Usopp thought about it. It was a chance to see his dad again and prove himself. He could also stick his accomplishments into that stupid butler Klahadore's face.

"Okay!"

Abruptly, Luffy looked down at the beach far below them. His gaze hardened, and Usopp shivered, even though that glare wasn't being directed at him.

"Luffy? What is it?"

"It's that butler who insulted your dad."

Sure enough, Klahadore was down there, waiting for something. What was he doing?

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Over with the others, they were staring at an oddly-dressed man with heart-shaped sunglasses.

"I'm Jango the Hypnotist!" he introduced himself.

"Oh, great. Another weirdo." Nami muttered.

"Hypnotist?" Naruto cocked his head. "What's that?"

"Observe!" Jango took out some sort of circular thing on a wire and began swinging it lightly back and forth. "On the count of three, all of you will fall asleep! 1... 2... *Jango!*"

Gaara felt some sort of pull on his consciousness, as if trying to lure him into sleep. But it wasn't a strong enough urge. The most he felt

was to simply yawn. Naruto, Piman, Ninjin, Tamanegi and even Jango himself fell asleep.

"Is he supposed to fall asleep too?" Nami wondered, and Zoro shrugged. This guy was certainly one of the weird ones.

Zoro sent a very flat look towards Jango. "He didn't even say 'three', just his name."

Jango was up within seconds though, and he looked at Gaara with a frown. "Why aren't you asleep?!"

"I slept fourteen days ago so I don't need to."

Nami stared down at Gaara. "...Fourteen days...?"

Jango had no idea how to respond to that. It was probably just the child's flight of fancy. "...Nevermind. I have to go and meet someone."

The odd man continued on his way, walking backwards even as he slowly disappeared further down the path.

The others woke up a minute later, bleary-eyed but feeling very well-rested.

"That's such a useful ability." Tamanegi had to admit, even though it was a bit peculiar.

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Meanwhile, at the coast...

Both Luffy and Usopp stared down at Klahadore. If he noticed they were there, he made no indication of it. It wasn't long until a man walking backwards finally joined Klahadore.

"Wow, what a weird guy." Luffy muttered, liking this situation even less.

"Hello, Jango." Klahadore straightened his glasses with a hand.

"Captain Kuro...it's been too long. Good to see you again."

"Don't call me that. Kuro is dead. I told you: my name is Klahadore now."

"Sure, sure. Klahadore." Jango glanced at Kuro's swollen cheek that

had a large, white bandage on it. "Did you have some trouble earlier?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle. Just a minor annoyance."

"We're ready and waiting for you, Captain. Will you be returning to sea with us?"

Klahadore, or rather Kuro, simply smirked. "Oh, not at all. I simply want to live out my days in peaceful harmony. Only a fool would want to live as a Pirate."

Given that his sunglasses hid his eyes, Jango proceeded to roll them. Sure, he had been and still was loyal to Kuro for reasons of his own. But Kuro's view on Pirates was an insult to the crew he himself had gathered only to tire of it because he didn't like the risks that came with the lifestyle. The only reason they were doing this was so Kuro would give them a portion of that Kaya-girl's fortune. Then they could split off for good.

"If you say so," Jango muttered.

"Now, remind me of the plan." Kuro said in his condescending way – meaning, Jango needed to repeat the plan to him to show that he understood what his role was and could carry it out without blunders. As if he couldn't carry out such a simple task. Jango disliked being treated like such a simpleton, but he begrudgingly did as he was told.

"We'll attack tomorrow at dawn; and while the men keep the villagers busy, I'll hypnotize that Kaya girl to have her give you everything in her will, and then I'll kill her."

Luffy frowned at the eerie calm ease and cruelty that wafted off of Kuro. He *liked* killing, but didn't like the consequences that came with it – like they were annoyances that got in his way.

Usopp's fists shook as he heard these men discussing attacking *his* village as if they were talking about the weather. The moment he heard them talking about killing Kaya, Usopp could no longer stay quiet.

"**WHAT?!**" Usopp shouted. "You bastard! After everything her family has done for you!"

"Hmm?" Kuro casually glanced up. "Oh? It's just you." His eyes landed on Luffy, who had a dangerous glare of his own. "And your little ruffian friend."

"Should I kill them?" Jango asked, sounding worried. "They'll reveal the plan!"

"No need," Kuro adjusted his glasses again, dismissing the two teens above them. Usopp was a known compulsive liar and the other one was a stranger. "They can talk all they want, but no-one will listen. I'll see you tomorrow, Jango."

With that, the two men began to leave.

"Oi, Kuro-Glasses!" Luffy shouted, and Usopp cringed at both the dangerous expression on Luffy's face and his calling out to the men.

"I'm gonna warn you now," Luffy said, looking every bit like the Captain that he was. "If you attack Usopp's village, I'm gonna kick your ass."

Kuro scoffed. "As if I have to worry about a nameless brat like you." He started to walk away before he paused, as if considering. "Wait. Jango, have them jump off the cliff." Kuro indicated Luffy. "Or at least that one. It would be a good lesson for young Usopp here."

Jango nodded and pulled out his pendulum. "On the count of three you will jump off that cliff! *One...GAH!*"

Jango jerked when something hard hit his face.

"*Pachinko Shot!*" Usopp was crouched on one knee as he held a slingshot and loaded it once again. "I won't let you get away! *Pachinko Shot!*"

This time, the projectile was aimed at Kuro, who simply caught the marble in his hand just before it collided with his face. He glared up at Usopp who fell back and shivered and crab-walked a few feet away, even though there was no way for the man to reach him.

"Alright, then." Luffy stood tall. "I'm declaring war on your crew," frowning, Luffy asked, "What's the name of your crew anyway?"

"A plebian like you thinks he can declare war? On me?" Kuro asked in annoyance.

"Well, yeah. I just did, didn't I? Didn't you understand? Are you an idiot?"

Kuro glared, and knew that right now he could do nothing – and for a

moment, his façade broke with mere eye twitch. But it was back in place within seconds. If this boy insisted on playing Pirate, then shouldn't he show the foolish brat the error of his ways? This island would be that nameless boy's grave.

"Let's just go, Jango. We don't have time to waste."

"I'll be waiting to kick your ass!" Luffy called after the men as they walked away.

Usopp clenched his teeth in anger. He had to do *something*! He couldn't just sit here. The village he loved was in danger. Kaya was in danger!

"I'm going to warn the villagers."

"Okay."

Luffy followed after Usopp as he ran into the village shouting, "Pirates! There are Pirates! They're going to attack the village tomorrow at dawn!"

People looked up from whatever they were doing and rolled their eyes. That foolish boy was at it again. Wasn't it a bit late in the day for it, though? Hadn't he already done all of his shouting this morning?

"Klahadore is their Captain! It's all his idea! His real name's Kuro!" Usopp continued, "Pirates are coming!"

That got people's attention, and their irritation wafted off of them in waves. Some were even angry.

"Enough of your ridiculous lies, boy!" an older woman shouted at him from her porch.

"Yeah!" a man agreed. "Klahadore is our friend! As if he'd ever do something like that!"

A man carrying a long stick stormed out of his yard with the intent on teaching that disrespectful boy a lesson. "Your lies have gone too far!"

"Usopp!" Luffy grabbed Usopp and yanked him back before the stick could strike him. Instead, Luffy caught the stick and glared up at the man, causing him to flinch back. Luffy let go when the man wisely backed away.

For Usopp's sake, because his desperation was clawing around Luffy's head like a trapped animal, he at least tried.

"It's true, Usopp and I saw Kuro-Glasses at the coast. He's really a dumbass."

"ENOUGH!" the mayor marched up to Luffy and Usopp and pointed a finger at them. "Enough of your *ridiculous* lies, Usopp! I've only put up with this nonsense for so long because of Banchina-san, but now you're trying to sully the name of a reputable man and you've dragged this," he waved a hand at Luffy, "random person into it?" The mayor then rounded on Luffy. "And you. How dare you go along with it? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Monkey D. Luffy, the guy who's gonna be the Pirate King." Luffy swiftly answered sincerely, annoying the mayor. Then, he turned back to Usopp who looked ready to cry. "Let's go, Usopp. We need to meet up with our crew."

"Our...our crew?" Usopp had forgotten that he had agreed to join Luffy's crew.

"Come on!" Luffy dragged Usopp away from the aggravated villagers.

"They didn't believe me." Usopp said despondently. His daily warning game had come to bite him in the ass *hard*. "No wonder they didn't believe me..."

"It's okay, I believe you, Usopp. We'll kick their asses, I promise!" Luffy said with a sparkling grin. "Our *nakama* are strong."

"Wait, stop!" Usopp pulled away from Luffy the moment he skidded to a stop. "I have to warn Kaya! Kuro'll kill her!"

Luffy frowned. He felt compelled to point out: "But those villagers didn't believe you..."

"Gah, I *know* that! But this is *Kaya*! She'll *have* to believe me! I have to try! *Please*, Luffy."

"Okay... we'll meet up later. Our *nakama* are by a field down the road from Kaya's."

"Thanks, Luffy!" Usopp ran quickly.

Well, that was that. Luffy found his crew, along with Piman, Tamanegi, and Ninjin.

"Where's Captain?" Tamanegi asked.

"Oh, he went to warn Kaya about her butler Kuro-Glasses actually being a Pirate who wants to attack the village tomorrow and kill her."

For a few seconds, everyone stared at Luffy before a unanimous shout of, "*WHAT?!*" erupted from his crew and the Usopp Pirates.

"That bastard!" Piman was incensed. "He talks trash about Pirates all the time when he *is* one?"

"I *knew* I didn't like him, 'ttebayou!"

"Can I crush him, Captain?"

"No! He's the Captain and *I'm* the Captain so that automatically makes him *my* opponent!"

"What're we going to do?" Ninjin asked nervously. "The butler must have a large enough crew if he's able to attack the village..."

"My crew is stronger than his." Luffy stated, earning surprised stares accompanied by feelings of respect and happiness at his praise from all but one of his *nakama*.

"How can you be so sure?" Nami asked. Worry, fear, and hesitation were in her emotions and doubt was in her words.

"Because their Captain lacks conviction."

"That doesn't mean you'll win!" Nami argued. "Numbers don't win battles!"

Instead of some sort of loud retort, Luffy smiled softly at her. "You've gotta have a little faith in our crew, Nami."

Nami just blinked. There was a feeling as if he had asked her why she even doubted their strength in the first place. She didn't know how to respond to that, so she instead stared at the ground.

Just then, hurt betrayal, anger and sadness hit Luffy. He turned to see Usopp, who still a good distance away.

"Usopp!" Luffy ran towards his friend.

"Wha-the Captain? What's wrong?" Piman asked worriedly.

"Captain!" the Usopp Pirates called in worry when they saw him.

Usopp walked defeated, holding his left hand against his upper right arm, which had blood running down it. It was clear that he was also crying, and the moment he saw Luffy and the others, he tried to hide the fact.

"Oh...h-hey, guys...this is nothing."

"Your arm..." Gaara frowned and walked up to Usopp. He pulled on the teen's overalls and forced him to sit down on a nearby rock. "Let me see."

Gaara quickly went to work using his sand to take the bullet out, ignoring any half-hearted protests Usopp might have had.

"What happened?" Zoro asked.

"I...I tried to warn Kaya, but I guess I didn't do a very good job." Usopp sniffed. "She didn't believe me, either. And Merry shot me. Heh..."

"Captain?" Ninjin asked hesitantly. "Is it true that Pirates are coming?"

'No, I lied,' was what Usopp desperately wanted to say. But...

"Yes, they are."

"Then we'll fight them!" Tamanegi declared, and both Piman and Ninjin heartily agreed.

"No, you *won't!*" Usopp shouted. He immediately felt guilty at their hurt expressions, but he went on, "Look, I've already tried to warn the villagers, but they won't listen to me. So that leaves you three." Usopp hoped that Luffy and his crew were as strong as Luffy seemed to think. If they failed, there was only one other desperate option to keep people safe. "You can at least warn your families and be ready. You can wake everyone up *before* dawn. Make a bunch of noise, and when the Pirates *do* come, they won't have as much of a surprise on everyone as they'd like."

Usopp sighed, a sad smile was on his face. "They all thought I was lying...so at least...I would like everyone to continue thinking I was lying."

"C-Captain..." Ninjin tearfully stuttered, before he started crying; soon followed by the other two Usopp Pirates.

"There," Gaara finished bandaging Usopp's arm. "It doesn't have to be amputated, so that's one good thing."

"Okay..." Usopp sweat dropped.

"What now, Luffy?" Zoro asked, his thumb absentmindedly flicked at Wado Ichimonji's guard.

"Well," Luffy looked serious as he answered, "We kick their asses and save Usopp's village."

"*That's* your plan?" Nami muttered, massaging her temple. "I don't know why I expected anything else."

"We could slow them down." Usopp suggested. "I've actually got some barrels of oil we could put on the slope between the coast and the village. They'll just slide around and won't be able to attack at all! We won't even have to fight them!"

Usopp's enthusiasm died a little when he saw the glowering expressions on Naruto and Gaara.

"I wanna practice my techniques, 'ttebayou."

"I wanted to collect more materials..."

Usopp blinked. Practicing techniques, he could understand. What did collecting materials have to do with fighting people?

Gaara tapped his chin thoughtfully. "...I suppose we *could* light the oil on fire."

That garnered various expressions of horror on some and serious consideration on others.

"NO!" Usopp was horrified at the thought. "Anyway, *if* we have to fight, and hopefully we don't," Usopp said, easily getting things and people organized in his mind for the worst-case scenario, along with getting everyone back on track. "What can everyone here do? Like, what're your best skills?"

Luffy punched a fist into his palm. "Stretching!"

Zoro had a bloodthirsty grin. "Cutting."

"Pranking!" Naruto pumped a fist into the air.

A creepy smile stretched across Gaara's face. "Crushing."

Nami winked. "Stealing."

"Yosh! I'll be hiding."

"You'll fight too!" the others objected, while Gaara glared at Usopp.

Sand slowly flowed out of his gourd. "You can hide within my sand. I have many people hidden within its grains and I can personally guarantee you will *never* be found."

"No, Gaara!" Luffy quickly protested, grabbing Gaara's shoulder as Usopp turned completely pale and fainted. "He's our new *nakama*! You can't kill him!"

"We have a new crewmember?" Naruto asked, grinning. "Awesome, 'ttebayou!" Naruto gave Usopp a friendly punch on his uninjured shoulder, ignoring the fact that the teen had fainted. "Welcome to our crew! Let's work hard together, 'ttebayou."

** I might be seeing you much earlier than I intended to, Mom!* * Usopp wept.

0000

The younger members of the Usopp Pirates were forced to go home very reluctantly, and Usopp used his position as Captain to order them to go home and stay there – and warn their family members about the attack, along with waking up the village before dawn, just in case.

It took several hours and three trips to get all the oil to the coast, afterwards, they decided to wait until it was closer to dawn to pour the oil. Gaara simply stayed awake and agreed to wake them at the allotted time.

Meanwhile, in the village; Tamanegi, Piman, and Ninjin had no luck in convincing their parents about the imminent attack. None of their parents believed them.

Ninjin leaned against the kitchen counter as he implored, "But mom, I'm serious! Klahadore *isn't* even his name! He's a Pirate and he's going to attack the village *tomorrow*!"

His mother slammed her hand on the counter. "That's *enough*, Ninjin! I don't want to hear another word of this, do you understand me?"

"But-"

"*Not* one more word." She pursed her lips for a moment before saying, "Usopp was running through the village earlier today saying something along those lines. Did he put you up to this?"

"No, but the Pirates are-"

"Ninjin...I'm glad that you're always coming home with tall tales of some grand adventure, and having fun with your friends," his mom sighed as she tiredly added, "I don't want you hanging out with Usopp anymore. He's a troublemaker."

Ninjin's jaw dropped. "Mom!"

"Please, just stop arguing with me Ninjin. I know you like him, and enjoy playing those games with him, but this one has gone too far. Sullyng a good man's reputation is not something you should be taking part in."

"But it's *not* a game this time, mom!"

She spoke with finality. "Go to your room, Ninjin."

With a heavy sigh, Ninjin did just that. Instead of walking up the stairs, he ran, stomping with every step and made sure to slam his door. He then slumped against it.

"What are we going to do?"

His parents thought he was lying. Captain wanted the attack to be a lie. Ninjin clenched his fist. If this is how his mom acted, then he could only imagine how Piman's and Tamanegi's conversations were going. In fact, once his dad came home, his mom would be telling him about his lies and how he wasn't allowed to play with Captain anymore.

Dammit, it wasn't fair!

Turning out the light, he simply laid down in bed, but he couldn't sleep. He heard his parents move around the house, and soon things settled in. But Ninjin couldn't sleep, knowing what was coming and wondering what he could do to stop it.

He wondered if Luffy's crew were strong. Even though he tried not to, he drifted off to sleep.

Ninjin was woken up by the sounds of pebbles hitting his window. He sat up with a gasp, until he realized that it wasn't dawn yet – not 'til a few hours from now. When Ninjin opened his window, he looked down at the faces of Tamanegi and Piman. They didn't even have to ask the question.

All he said was, "Mom told me not to play with Captain anymore."

Their grim expressions showed similar sentiments.

Piman squared his shoulders and motioned to Ninjin. "Come on."

Ninjin quickly stuffed several pillows and stuffed animals under the covers of his bed; then expertly climbed out of his window and closed it just enough so that he could easily open it upon returning.

"Here's what were gonna do." Piman said. "Captain said he wants the attack to be another of his lies... so we have to help him!"

"Yes, sir!" Ninjin and Tamanegi said as loud as they dared.

"But what about Kaya-san?" Tamanegi asked. "She's part of why that Pirate-guy's doing this, right?"

Now, the boys were conflicted about what they should do.

"I say we rescue Kaya-san." Tamanegi said with a somewhat shaky voice. "If Klahadore's plan relies on Kaya-san to succeed, then it'd make sense to get her, right?"

"Well," Ninjin was trying to think, "Perhaps if we kept watch...or set off fireworks? The Captain has a lot of those in our hideout, right? We could set them to go off..."

They weren't as skilled with rigging traps like their Captain, but they could make it work. Somehow. There was a broken door leading into the church that the minister never bothered to fix, because why would he? But one of them could run to the church and start ringing the bell, while under the cover of loud fireworks. The Pirates might even think they were being attacked.

"Let's go." Piman said, looking more confident than he felt.

The boys made their way towards the mansion, hoping that they could succeed for the sake of their Captain and their village.

The boys snuck in through their usual hedge, and hid in the garden

where they could see the front door. The best plan they came up with was to keep watch in shifts, giving the others a chance to sleep. So far, there wasn't shouting coming from the village...and it was nearing dawn. Piman was awake, holding a matchbox in his trembling hands; ready to light a fuse that led to a case of fireworks.

Just then, there was an odd noise from inside the mansion, and then it sounded like yelling. Piman quickly woke his friends, and they were up so quickly they probably weren't really sleeping at all. The butler – Klahadore slowly made his way outside, and it was easy to see the obvious bladed glove – and even in the dim, morning light, the shimmer of red on the blades could be seen.

"Hmm?" Kuro paused briefly and frowned. He glanced in the boys' direction.

Each of the boys were frozen to the spot, terrified of being seen. Each of them covered their mouths and noses, refusing to even breathe. Kuro stared in their direction for a bit longer.

"Why don't I hear anything?" Kuro muttered irritably as he stared at the rising sun. "Shouldn't those fools be attacking the town by now? How incompetent..."

Kuro left, and the trio of boys didn't dare to move or breathe until they were sure that Kuro was gone. They quickly made their way into the mansion to check on everyone. If Kaya and Merry were dead, then they'd raise the alarm.

It was very difficult not to think of the worst possible scenario.

0000

It was every respectable butler's job to be awake just before dawn. Today was a special one. It was the third-year anniversary since Klahadore came to them, and Kaya was excited about the new glasses she had ordered for him. Merry went about his business setting everything up for that day.

Certain foods were going to be prepared for this special day. Hopefully that boy's antics hadn't soiled the mood. Merry heard shuffling behind him, and he turned to see Klahadore.

"Oh, good morning, Klahadore." Merry greeted pleasantly, not taking offence to Klahadore's simple nod. The man tended to have a more stoic demeanor than Merry did. He walked over to the counter where

the new glasses were set. "Kaya-sama got something for you. Today is when you first came to us."

Klahadore had a large duffle bag with him for some reason, but Merry didn't bother to ask. He simply presented the glasses case.

"I think perhaps if you wear these when you see Kaya-sama today, you'll make her very happy." Merry smiled as if he were sharing a joke. "She noticed how your glasses would slip and how you always were having to adjust them."

Klahadore picked the glasses out of their case and stared at them for a moment. To Merry's absolute shock, Klahadore crushed the glasses in his fist and simply let the shards fall from his hand.

"How annoying." Klahadore's voice was like ice on Merry's spine. His gaze was like a predator's. Klahadore reached into the duffle bag and pulled out some sort of glove with long blades attached. Klahadore smiled. "You really should have listened to that idiot boy, Merry."

Merry didn't have time to scream as Klahadore slashed his stomach and chest. Not enough to kill him, but it would certainly hinder him. Merry stumbled back in horror.

"Instead, you went and shot him, didn't you? You made things easier for me."

Klahadore chuckled as Merry drew his pistol. Merry had Klahadore in his sights, and he fired. Except... Klahadore was gone – a shadow fell over Merry and Klahadore was swinging his blades down. Merry screamed when his arm – Merry's mind went into a panic because his arm was *gone*. It was there on the floor *next* to him. That *wasn't* where it was supposed to be!

"What about everything Kaya-sama's family has done for you?!"

"You were always so amusing, Merry." Klahadore said, expertly flicking his gloved hand. "Since you were going to die anyway, I'll just tell you, just to give you some relief. You'll be seeing our dear Kaya-sama again very soon."

"You bastard!" Merry tried to move, he *had* to move! But the pain from his injuries had started to set in as his adrenaline died down.

"Goodbye, Merry." Klahadore casually strolled out of the room.

Merry felt tears in his eyes. If only... If only he had just used some common sense! Usopp's tales had always been fanciful, and it had been true that there was always contention between Usopp and Klahadore... but Usopp had never said anything bad about the man or any of the other villagers...Until yesterday.

"Kaya-sama..." * *I'm so sorry I failed...* *

"AHHH!" a voice screamed, causing Mary to flinch. "There's blood! He's bleeding!"

Merry blearily blinked up into the terrified and very worried faces of the Usopp Pirates.

00000

It was nearing dawn, and the oil had been poured down the slope, and now they were waiting...and waiting...and waiting...

"Why aren't they here yet?" Naruto asked impatiently with a whine. Even the others couldn't blame him for voicing how they felt.

"They're running late?" Nami guessed irritably.

"Oh, no...no, no, no..." Usopp covered his mouth in dawning, horrifying realization. "There's another coast!"

"What?" Nami was incensed. "You said that they'd be coming *here!*"

"Only because *this* was where Kuro and that weird hypnotist guy met, so I assumed!"

Luffy closed his eyes, took a deep breath and focused with his Haki. He could feel... bloodlust, twisted happiness... he didn't feel any fear and panic yet, so they hadn't reached the village.

"That way, they're over there." Luffy pointed.

"That's the north coast!" Usopp realized, and he took off as fast as he could with Luffy not far behind.

"Wait for me, 'ttebayou!"

"YES!" Gaara said with a wide grin as sand flowed around him erratically.

Nami gasped. "That's where my treasure is!"

When Nami turned on her heel, she slipped on some oil. Instinctively, she reached out for the closest thing – which was Zoro.

"Wha-?" Zoro started, before Nami dragged him back and used him as a springboard to get onto the none-oiled terrane.

"You bitch!" Zoro shouted as he slid to the bottom.

"I have to make sure my treasure is safe!"

Zoro scrambled, trying to reach the top, but to no avail. This process was repeated several more times. He was going to cut that woman up for doing this to him! Zoro slid back to the bottom one more time before he paused and slapped his forehead. It was a good thing no-one was around to witness his slip-up.

"I can just ghost over there."

Zoro closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to imagine the coast and their ship. Then, he stepped forward.

00000

After living on this island for seventeen years, Usopp practically knew the forest like the back of his hand. He raced over and under tree roots. Somewhere along the way, Usopp had lost Luffy, but he didn't have time to stop and look for him.

Usopp was gasping for breath mostly because of his panic. When Usopp did reach the north coast, he stopped to see a large, black ship with a cat figurehead. There were several men standing around Luffy's ship, although some of them appeared to be injured? Those who weren't looked to be discussing the vessel while someone else was yelling at them to get a move on.

Others were heading his way, but were too busy laughing and joking amongst themselves to notice him.

Usopp took a deep breath. "STOP RIGHT THERE, PIRATES!"

They all froze, but then started to laugh. "What? It's just one kid."

"Go back to where you came from, otherwise, I'll call my five thousand men to come fight!"

The Pirates all quirked their eyebrows in doubt or laughed in disbelief.

"What?!" Jango burst out. "So many!"

"Captain, he's lying!" one man called.

"What?! You bastard, how dare you trick me!" Jango thrust out his arm. "Men! Attack!"

The Pirates shouted and charged. Usopp quickly pulled out his slingshot and began firing, but it wasn't enough.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING WITH MY TREASURE?!" a voice shrieked in anger. Nami charged passed Usopp and down the slope; dodging and weaving through the onslaught of Pirates, assembling her Bo staff as she went, aiming for those who were the closest to the ship. She had no idea if they had taken anything or not, and she wasn't going to give them the chance.

To see a woman yelling at them about treasure caused the opposing Pirates to pause in some confusion. But then one of them got the butt of a Bo staff in his gut and another strike to his knee. While he didn't go down, it was certainly shocking enough to get the others moving.

One man charged at her and got the butt of her Bo staff in the chin, breaking his jaw. Another received broken ribs. Yet another received a blown knee-cap. Usopp carefully noted *not* to get between Nami and her money. Ever.

The men quickly drew swords and pistols, ready for a fight.

"YA-HOOOO~!"

A figure dropped out of the sky, and landed on two of the men facing Nami. "Wow that was fun!" Luffy stood and brushed himself off. Nami and her remaining opponents were all too shocked at his sudden appearance to move. "I figured I could get here faster if I sling-shotted my way down! *Shishishi!*"

Luffy punching another Pirate with a "*Gomu-Gomu Pistol*" got them moving again.

So far, it was just Luffy and Nami at the forefront – Luffy, because he liked being in the middle of things; and Nami, because this was her treasure at stake.

Naruto came in minutes later, wielding his kusarigama. Feigning slashing out with the blade, he used the weighted ball at the opposite

end of the chain to attack one of the men when he went to block. The ball smashed into the guy's knee. Naruto then sprung off the ground with a burst of chakra, and sliced through the man.

"Oni Giri!"

It wasn't enough to kill him, but it had taken him out of the fight.

Gaara wasn't far behind, and he stormed out onto the slope with a wide grin. Finally, he'd get to fight! Gaara slipped the goggles onto his face.

Usopp wondered what they were for – which he felt compelled to ask.

Gaara's smile turned normal for a few seconds to shyly reply, "...they make me look cool."

Usopp took out another Pirate with a shot from his slingshot. "Oh... uh, you're right. They kinda do."

"...Thanks."

Gaara beamed up at Usopp, making him gulp and nervously smile at the kid before the boy turned his attention onto the Pirates and stormed down upon them with a roar and sand whipping around him.

"What a strange kid..." Usopp muttered to himself.

Sand wrapped around the arms and legs of several men and Gaara smiled as he clenched a fist. "*Sabaku Kyu!*"

Usopp's jaw dropped. Wow. Alright. That wasn't terrifying at all. He tried focusing on anyone who managed to avoid the others' onslaught and rapid-fired pachinko balls at them. Fortunately for him, those who slipped by were few and far between.

Jango took a step back and stared in horror. His men were screaming. Someone rushed up behind Gaara with a sword and swung downwards with ferocity. But the kid didn't even turn around as a sand wall shot up blocking the attack; gripping the guy's sword and his hands. Gaara turned his head around slowly, and even though the goggles hid his eyes, there was a predatory grin.

Sand wrapped around the man's left arm. "I'll be nice and just take one."

The man screamed as his arm was crushed and he collapsed to the

ground.

This wasn't... Jango felt nauseated. While some of his men did indeed lose their limbs, most of them were getting broken to incapacitate. The men honestly didn't know what to do about the crazy red-haired kid because none of their attacks could hit him.

Luffy had taken care of most of the men who had been after Nami and her initial charge, but he'd taken to fighting the others. That left Nami facing off against a large man with a sword. He swung wildly at her, and Nami thanked her honed reflexes and the fact this guy was fairly slow. The problem was that neither of them could really get an opening.

Nami used her staff to block a downward strike. Her muscles strained, and the Pirate was likely counting on her giving out first. Nami's mind raced as she tried to think of a way out of this without getting injured. Another Pirate decided to take advantage of her situation, and charged at her with his sword. No!

At that moment, Zoro came from somewhere up above, and landed on top of the second guy who tried to attack her, taking him out. His sudden appearance distracted both Nami and the Pirate who stared dumbly at Zoro.

"Where...where did you come from?" the befuddled man asked, but he went ignored.

"Oi, Nami!" Zoro immediately stood and casually sliced at the guy who she had been holding off, and he fell like a sack of potatoes. "You're lucky I could get passed that slope!"

This...this was absolutely ridiculous! Jango glared at the opposing Pirates. It was like none of them were taking this seriously! It was like none of them were even challenged by the Black Cat Pirates! They had to finish their mission otherwise Kuro would kill them!

"Sham! Buchi!" Jango yelled, towards the guards on his ship. "Get out here!"

"Oh, how scary!" a voice from the Black Cat's ship called.

"Please don't hurt us!" another said.

Naruto quirked an eyebrow at the two men who appeared. "What? More weirdos?"

Gaara cocked his head as he took in the sight of their outfits. "Are they perverts?"

Sham and Buchi heard the comments and nearly collapsed. "As if!"

"I don't wanna fight you!" Sham shouted as he charged towards Zoro with a tear-filled high-pitched scream.

Nami looked at the screaming man with pity. He clearly wasn't a threat. So why was Zoro holding that stance? Gaara went a bit overboard in her opinion, and the guys she had teamed up with clearly liked to fight a little too much.

Zoro frowned. What was with this guy? Perhaps if Zoro hadn't been raised by a guy who was a former Shinobi and spent enough time in a country filled with them, he would have believed the act that Sham was putting on. His unassuming posture spoke volumes.

Koshiro's painful admonishments often involved him getting whacked on the head as he was reminded to never underestimate *any* opponent. Thinking, *'oh, this one is no threat to me'* could very well be the last thing that goes through someone's mind – along with the blade or the bullet the opponent uses to strike them down.

Koshiro's expression as he said tiredly, "*Do try not to die a fool's death, Zoro-kun...*" had always annoyed Zoro every time.

Sham ducked low and reached forward. "*Neko Baba! Huh?*"

Zoro was just...*gone*.

"Did you really think I'd fall for that?" Zoro asked from several feet away. "Quit the cry-baby act and fight me."

Sham frowned as well. How did this guy get all the way over there? "What act? I really don't wanna die! Please have mercy!"

"*Cat the Funyatta!*"

Something – or more like *someone* struck Zoro from behind, sending him crashing to the ground with the wind knocked out of him.

There was another call of "*Neko Baba!*" as he was falling, and two of his swords were taken. A very large weight sat on his back, and Buchi was hardly a small man. He was deceptively fast.

"Heh, you forgot about lil' ol' me!" the man laughed tauntingly as he stood over Zoro.

"Bastard!" Naruto charged in, and used the weighted end of his weapon to smash Buchi in the face. This was followed closely by landing on Buchi's shoulder and discharging a large amount of chakra. The shattering sound of Buchi's shoulder was sickening, and he stumbled back. Zoro took in several welcome breaths the moment Buchi's weight was off of him.

"You little brat!" Buchi grabbed Naruto by one of his legs and whipped him into the ground once – only to have an infuriated Zoro in his face – striking across Buchi's chest with just one sword. While Zoro was admittedly not as good with a one-sword style as Koshiro would have liked, it was the attack itself that could do plenty of damage alone.

"*Akuma no Kanashi sakebi-waza!*" blue chakra surrounded Zoro's blade, and an ear-ringing hum reverberated around them.

Buchi's grip on Naruto's leg loosened, and the large man fell to the ground. He struggled to pull himself up, but with a broken shoulder and injured torso, it was difficult.

Sham stared. What was with this guy?!

"H-hey... B-Buchi!" Sham looked nervous at the display and the glare Zoro was sending him, but he had a job to do. He threw the swords to the side and charged forward again. Sham turned his ire on Zoro. "You bastard! How dare you do that to Buchi!"

Sham stopped messing around as he started picking up speed. He was rapidly swiping with his claws left and right, forcing Zoro to do nothing but block or dodge. Sham's cat-likeness wasn't just his strange attire. It was also his speed and reflexes. Sham managed to strike Zoro across the chest once.

Tiring of this, Zoro called out, "*Sora surasshu gihō!*"

The attack wasn't as strong as it normally was, and Zoro's aim wasn't to kill. Sham collapsed to the ground, taking in several painful gasps.

"I'm kinda disappointed," Zoro bemoaned as he gathered his swords. "No-one's been a challenge."

Zoro was then next to Naruto. "Are you alright, brat?"

"Yeah. Just a bump and a few scratches." Naruto cocked his head. "How about you?"

"I think he broke something, so I just need some sleep."

Naruto sent his brother a flat look. "Kyuubi says you need a lot more than that..."

Zoro rolled his eyes.

0000

Up on the slope, Usopp only saw Kuro because he had to tackle a Pirate who managed to avoid most of the fray and tried getting passed him. When a shadow fell over them, Usopp took note of the shadow's extremely long fingers and screamed in fright and quickly backed away. Kuro stared at the scene before him in steadily mounting.

His pawns were laying on the ground, defeated. And *that* boy...that infuriating boy *dared* to stand there and glare at *him*.

"I told you," Luffy said calmly the moment he saw Kuro. "My crew would be challenging yours and your ass was gonna get kicked."

"AHHH!" the men were all screaming. "It's the Captain!"

"What..." the mask of calm slipped briefly. "What is going on here?!"

"There...these Pirates!" one of the men cried out.

Kuro could see the Nyaban Brothers from where he stood.

"Sham...Buchi..." the brothers flinched in spite of their wounds. "Five minutes. You have five minutes to deal with them. Otherwise, I'll kill you."

The Nyaban Brothers then turned to Jango, desperately.

Jango pulled out his hypnotic ring. "On the count of three, you'll be stronger and feel no pain! *One...Two...Jango!*"

The two brothers roared and their muscles got bigger.

"No...way..." Luffy muttered before his eyes shined at the usefulness of the ability. "That's so cool! I'd like to be hypnotized to eat lots of meat!"

Zoro cursed when the two Brothers charged at him with a cry of, "*Neko-Yanagi Daikoshin!*"

"You just *had* to wish for a challenge..." Naruto muttered to Zoro.

The Nyaban Brothers were blindly charging at Naruto and Zoro. It appeared that in their hypnotized state they simply knew nothing more beyond "hit it until it stops moving". Annoyingly, Sham and Buchi constantly switched between their opponents.

Unaware that they were getting closer to the shore line, Naruto dodged an attack from Buchi – who charged passed where Naruto was standing – right...into their ship. The skull figurehead hit the shore, and Buchi slammed through the ship a few more times before charging back out towards Naruto.

The jaws of Luffy's crew dropped when they saw the damage to their ship.

"Baro-chan!" Naruto called out.

"Our...ship..." Gaara said, looking at the damage to the front Buchi had done. All those carvings he had done over countless hours on those sleepless nights when he kept watch or they simply sailed along...broken. Lost forever.

"Why you..." Luffy suddenly turned and grabbed the bow and connecting figurehead off of the Black Cat's ship, ripping it off completely. It was the Black Cats' turn to look shocked. Luffy wielded the figurehead like a giant bat and smashed it against the Black Cat's ship.

"We... we can't leave, now..." one of the Pirates needlessly pointed out.

Taking advantage of the distraction, Buchi's claws suddenly snuck into Naruto's stomach. Naruto let out a painful gasp, before he disappeared in a puff of smoke, and a piece of Baro-chan was in his place. Buchi looked confused even in his wild state, before he was suddenly yanked into the ground.

"Doton: Shinjū Zanshu no Jutsu!"

Naruto rose out of the ground a few feet away. Buchi couldn't move, and Naruto began hitting him with the ball-end of his kusarigama. "Fat-cat-bastard! Look at what you've done to our ship, Dattebayo!"

Several lumps slowly appeared on Buchi's head.

Sham didn't even realize what had happened to his brother, as he was so focused on getting Zoro.

"Akuma no Kanashi sakebi-waza!" Zoro repeated the technique, and even Kuro flinched at the ear-ringing cry of the blades; made all the more intense because of Zoro's use of three swords. Sham fell to the ground in a messy and bloody heap. While he wasn't dead, Sham would likely wish he was when he woke up.

0000

Meanwhile, up on the slope, the mask of calmness slipped once again. Kuro observed this...this utter nonsense! How could these pawns be so incompetent?!

"Klahadore!" Kaya called out, running up to the man. In spite of the insistence that it was a bad idea from the three boys following her, Kaya had to know why. She wanted to understand.

Kuro turned and lashed out behind him instinctively. Kaya suddenly stumbled and fell, and the swords sailed over her, just missing scarring her face or worse.

"Oh. It's you." Kuro said with a mix of contempt and annoyance. "It would have been problematic if you had died just then."

Kaya shivered, and Tamanegi, Piman, and Ninjin shakily stood in front of her, wielding their wooden swords.

"Kaya! Men!" Usopp called out. Turning to Kuro and temporarily forgetting his fear, Usopp demanded, "Leave her alone!"

"Why, Klahadore?" Kaya asked, tears streaming down her face. "Why'd you attack Merry? Why are you doing this?"

"Quite simple, really. For the tranquility of my soul."

"What...what do you *want*? If you don't attack the village, I'll give it to you!" Kaya begged desperately. "I'll give you anything you want!"

She'd be willing to give it, even if he wanted... she swallowed nervously at the implications she had potentially promised.

"Ah...so, you would give me your life?" Kuro's eyes were dark and cold.

Kaya's eyes widened in fear. How...how could *this* be the same man her parents had taken in? With whom she had shared jokes and secrets? He had always smiled at her, laughed with her... The man standing before her was a stranger. No. A *monster*.

"NO! Kaya!" Usopp desperately called out. "Get out of here! Usopp Pirates!"

The three boys looked to Usopp. "Get her out of here! Protect Kaya! That's an order!"

The three boys nodded, helped Kaya up, and began to run off.

Kuro sighed at this inconvenience. These brats were certainly a thorn in his side. His mask dropped long enough for his eye and the corner of his mouth to twitch.

"Jango, go take care of those brats and *make* that girl sign that will!"

"Yes, Captain!" Jango ran after Kaya and the boys, managing to avoid the others by swinging that strange ring of his and using it as a makeshift grappling hook to pull himself into the nearby trees. He emerged from the forest onto the path where Kaya and the boys had fled.

"Gaara!" Luffy called out. "Help protect Kaya! Don't kill that weird hypno-guy unless you absolutely have to!"

"Yes, Captain!" Gaara ran quickly, scaling the rocky wall easily without the use of his hands, much to the surprise of those who could really do nothing but watch him go.

"You really think your little pet will be able to do anything?" Kuro mocked.

Luffy only smirked. "You really think your hypno-guy can do anything to Gaara?"

Kuro scoffed at the display of confidence. Interfering with his plans and making things more difficult than they had to be. These children really liked to play Pirate. Very well. He would show them what happens when a fool plays such dangerous games.

0000

Jango ran after the children and that annoying girl. Did she really

think that Kuro had a sympathetic side to him? His former Captain's acting skill were to be commended. Or maybe the girl was really just that naïve.

He was growing more and more annoyed by the second. If he didn't get the girl to sign the will, then Kuro would most certainly kill him. If the girl signed the will, then Kuro would kill her instead. It was either him or her, and he'd like to keep his head attached and organs *inside* his body, thank you very much!

Jango wasn't sure how long he'd been chasing the brats for, when he finally came upon a clearing with a large stump and Kaya sitting beside it. She looked pale and exhausted; a thin shin of sweat was on her forehead. She was breathing heavily, and a hand was held against her chest, as if to calm her racing heart.

"Are you done running?" Jango asked suspiciously. "Where're the brats?"

"I...I sent them away. As long as I do what you want, will you leave them alone?" Kaya softly asked in a raspy tone.

"Yes."

Well, *he* wouldn't kill the brats, but his men on the other hand... he wouldn't speak for them.

"Promise me on your life as a Pirate Captain." Kaya said.

"I swear." Jango then produced the will and practically slammed it down onto the stump. He then took a pen from his jacket pocket and held it out for her. "Now, sign this."

Kaya nodded and reached for the pen. Instead of simply taking the pen, her hand rested on Jango's for an uncomfortably long few seconds, causing Jango to glance curiously and suspiciously between his hand and Kaya. Was she trying to win him over?

Suddenly, sand enveloped his hand.

A smile stretched across Kaya's face as it began cracking. Jango screamed and tried to pull away from whatever this thing was. A feeling of Killing Intent washed over him, making it almost impossible to breathe.

"Captain told me I couldn't kill you unless I had to, even though you

wrecked our ship." a voice that wasn't Kaya's came out of the girl. She slowly disintegrated into more sand, revealing that strange, red-haired kid. "So I'll settle for something else."

More sand extended and wrapped around one of his legs. "What are you doing?!"

A smile that sent shivers down Jango's spine crossed the boy's lips as he extended a hand and clenched his fist. "*Sabaku!*"

Jango screamed as his arm and leg were crushed, followed by his other leg being broken. As sand returned to his gourd, Gaara picked up the will and let his sand take that away as well, into his gourd.

"You little bastard!" Jango gasped. "I'll get you for this!"

Gaara merely inclined his head towards the man, and crossed his arms. "If you keep talking I will break your jaw."

Jango quickly shut his mouth and shivered unintentionally. Kuro certainly *was* dangerous, but there was something about this kid that put him on a whole other level. Unlike Kuro, this kid was sparing him. How odd, that the bigger monster had even an ounce of mercy.

"We should get back to the coast." Gaara said as he stood.

The bushes several feet away shook, and Kaya and the boys stepped out. They were looking at Gaara with some fear and even admiration. Gaara stared at the ground, not really looking at Kaya or the other boys.

"Are you...are you alright?" he asked them after a moment.

Kaya nodded. While the scene had been terrifying and Jango's screams would probably haunt her for a good while, Gaara had protected them. She just wasn't used to such...violence. Her world had been so small, and now seeing what people were capable of... did Usopp really want a part of this?

But... Gaara wasn't like Kla-Kuro.

"Thank you, Gaara-kun." Kaya smiled tiredly.

"Wow, that was scary..." Ninjin said. "But so cool!"

"I've never seen anything like that!" Tamanegi agreed.

"That sand is so useful..." Piman commented.

"We can't just leave him like this." Kaya said, looking at Jango's bloody stumps, trying her best not be queasy or think of Merry.

"I can." Gaara muttered under his breath. But he didn't argue.

Kaya used sections of her dress to bandage Jango's wounds. When that was done, Gaara formed a platform and picked up Jango, and the others followed him back to the coast. The Hypnotist stubbornly refused to look at them or say anything. He was too exhausted and sore from his injuries to move, so Jango simply lay there, wondering what was going to happen.

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Kuro scoffed at the display of confidence. Interfering with his plans and making things more difficult than they had to be. These children really liked to play Pirate. Very well. He would show them what happens when a fool plays such dangerous games.

Kuro tapped one foot on the ground, easily ignoring the pleas of his men. With the men begging for their Captain to not use "that move" Luffy was quick to yell, "Zoro! Naruto! Protect Nami and Usopp!"

The two were quick to comply without question.

Kuro suddenly vanished from where he had been standing previously, and Naruto's jaw dropped. "He vanished?!"

Naruto glanced around nervously – looking at the ground. Was this guy seriously moving fast enough that he didn't even disturb the dirt? There was a loud clang and sparks from where Zoro was standing, and he was glaring. Various rocks and trees around them suddenly had a disturbance as they were cut – even his own men were cut down by him.

Naruto felt a bit guilty about Buchi – who was still stuck in the hole – as he got cut and a good portion of his scalp came off. There was no walking away from that one.

It was enough to make Naruto's stomach sick. How could someone think so little of the people who followed them?

Kuro appeared again very briefly before he did that hopping thing from before and vanished once again.

Luffy quickly dodged. While Kuro's attacks certainly were fast, he had no control. If Kuro could actually control how and where he moved, there would actually be something to worry about.

"If someone is faster than you, you still have a chance of winning." Touma said. "Speed means nothing if you can't control it. It leaves you exposed, because if you can't see where you're going, you have no chance of seeing what is coming right at you."

Luffy positioned himself, and made a fist. He closed his eyes and focused; the world around him draining away until it was just him and Kuro. Kuro was moving around like an erratic Ping-Pong ball, but was making his way towards Luffy. When Kuro was within inches of striking Luffy, he spun out of the way just enough to dodge. Using his built-up momentum, Luffy slammed his fist into Kuro's stomach.

"Gomu-Gomu no Pistol Twist!"

It was a nasty-sounding impact that sent Kuro flying backwards into the Cliffside, with the impact shattering his glasses.

Luffy was quick to then stretch his arm over and rip off the sword-glove. Gaara would certainly like it. Well...these guys weren't going anywhere, with their ship in the condition it was in.

When Gaara and the others appeared, Luffy tossed the glove to Gaara.

"Here you are, Gaara." Luffy smiled.

Kaya gasped loudly as the glove sailed through the air; blades glinting. What was Luffy thinking?! Gaara caught the glove, and his shield rose up to protect him from the blades that would have definitely cut him if it weren't for his shield. Gaara stared at the glove for a moment before beaming up at Luffy.

"Thank you, Captain."

"What are we going to do with all these guys?" Nami asked, as she helped tie the last of them up.

Naruto thought for a moment. He glanced at the now useless ships, then the Pirates. "Usopp...I know ya wanted the attack to be a lie, and well technically it didn't happen, 'ttebayou." Naruto's foxy grin showed itself. "I've got an idea. Kaya-sis, you wouldn't happen to have a Den-Den Mushi at your house, would you?"

"I do, yes."

"Perfect!"

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By now, the townsfolk had woken up and it was certainly odd that Usopp didn't come running through the town yelling about Pirates. Perhaps yesterday had finally taught the boy a lesson. Three sets of parents though, found themselves in a panic when they went to wake up their boys only to find pillows and stuffed animals tucked under the covers of their respective beds.

So the parents started running around town asking if anyone had seen their boys.

Another oddity that soon presented itself was the appearance of a Marine vessel on the horizon.

Naturally, people went to go see what was going on. Arriving at the coast, that was when they found the three missing boys all standing off to the side with a tearful and exhausted-looking Kaya, with the likes of Zoro, Luffy, Usopp, and Nami sitting with her.

There was a group of nearly thirty Pirates who were all tied up and sitting on the ground. Among them... was Klahoradol.

"Kaya-san? What's...what happened?" the Mayor asked.

Kaya looked up at him with tears in her eyes. She was still feeling stressed from this entire ordeal. "Klahoradol was...*is* a Pirate." Shocked gasps was the immediate response. "He attacked Merry, and if it hadn't been for these boys," Kaya indicated Piman, Ninjin, and Tamanegi, "Merry would have died. Kuro is his real name. He planned to attack the village today, but Captain Luffy and his crew stopped them."

"Usopp..." the Mayor looked guilty. "You...you were telling the truth."

"I wanted it to be a lie, really I did." Usopp said quickly. He grinned and pointed to himself. "But the Pirates weren't a problem for the great Usopp!"

"I'm sorry, Usopp..." one of the villagers said guiltily.

All of them were sorry, of course.

Down on the beach, a redheaded girl and a raven-haired boy were

talking to the Marines.

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Commodore Snuzu sighed heavily and yawned as he listened to this Bounty Hunter Naruko girl talk. He'd much rather be sleeping. She reasoned that the Marines should pay her and her partner a few thousand extra for catching the guy they had supposedly executed. Plus, they had caught his entire crew who were there to raid and pillage. Who cared that some of them were dead (all by the hands of their own former Captain). Oh, and to top it off, Kuro was planning to kill a girl for her fortune, as proved by a will that the black-haired teen had gotten his hands on. Did he *ever* blink?

The black-haired kid was now saying something about there being a bloodbath, and surely, the Marines failed in properly confirming that the man who died was in fact, Kuro. While the Marines didn't really like being told they had done their jobs terribly; it was an unfortunate fact in this case.

Commodore Snuzu yawned, and blinked blearily at the two Bounty Hunters in front of him. He wanted to sleep. This was such a tiresome thing. He had only come here because he had been in the area for something else, and East Blue was the most boring of all the Blues. He wanted to leave. No offense to anyone from East Blue, it was just a fact. He looked up on the slope, seeing a straw-hat wearing kid talking to a small group of people. That kid kinda looked like... the one from the old picture on Garp's desk.

Huh...wonder what Luffy was doing here...not that it was his problem or concern.

He sighed heavily when from a distance away, an enraged and tearful Sham was shouting at Kuro.

"I'll kill you for what you did to Buchi, you bastard!" Sham was snarling. He didn't care about his wounds. "You *better* hope you are locked away *far away* from me! Pray to the Great Cat that I don't get you!"

Kuro glared at nothing. He had become a pariah to his entire crew, and nearly all of them were begging for some kind of deal from the annoyed Marines watching them.

Jango glared at Kuro. This was his fault. Sure, there was plenty of blame to be placed on those damn Pirate kids... but...

"I never should have continued listening to you after you left us, Kuro." Jango said. "I should have just left you in this stupid village and been done with it. I hope you rot in the deepest depths of Impel Down."

Kuro's lips twitched briefly into a deeper frown. He said nothing.

"16,000,000, huh..." Snuzu nearly fell asleep on his feet, but one of his Marines poked him. "How boring... eh..." Snuzu scratched the back of his head. "How about 30,000,000 for 'em all?"

"He was going to hypnotize Kaya into giving him her entire inheritance, and then kill her." Gaara said, his unblinking gaze making the Marines shiver. Snuzu simply yawned again. "Make it 80."

"80, huh?" Snuzu muttered. That was *way* more than what Kuro was worth. But this was several lives; a village...how tiresome.

"Hey..." one of the Marines started, but Snuzu waved a hand, wanting to get this entire thing over with so he could sleep.

"Fine, fine. You can have 80,000,000 belli for the lot. It's too tiresome to discuss these things."

Snuzu's Marines couldn't really disagree with him, so they did as requested and gave Naruto the requested belli. Bounty Hunters were troublesome things. Several of the Pirates couldn't walk, so that left having to carry them into the brig. The dead ones were wrapped up and stored in a separate cell to be processed later.

Sham could still be heard tearfully mourning Buchi.

Kuro glared at the two Bounty Hunters as he was dragged away. All those years of planning put to waste. He would get those brats back one day, one way or another. Monkey D. Luffy and his crew would pay.

Joining the others, it wasn't until they were far enough away from the coast that Naruto and Gaara were back to normal. Naruto grinned as he handed Nami several stacks of belli.

"It's your cut of the money, Nami." Naruto said with a grin at the sight of Nami's shocked expression.

"Eh, Nami, you alright?" Luffy asked.

"Yeah..." Nami replied quietly. There was a mild bit of irritation when she noticed that Naruto was giving a cut of the money to the members of the Usopp Pirates – even though it was a few thousand each. But... they had most definitely helped.

Their parents should be proud.

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Merry was an arm short, and seemed to tire more easily, but he insisted on helping when and where he could. The man was a natural organizer, so he was in charge of making sure the Pirates had everything they needed. Medical supplies, extra wood for any necessary repairs, and plenty of food was just a few of the things the villagers were willing to gift to the Pirates.

The moment Merry began to feel tired, Kaya was at his side with a glass of water and a few pain pills, insisting that he sit down and rest.

"You've spent many years taking care of me, Merry..." Kaya smiled. "Now, it's my turn to return the favor."

Merry could only sigh and smile back. "Of course, Kaya-sama."

She was certainly just like her parents.

While Usopp packed everything he needed for journeying out into the world, the crew of the former Baroque Works ship worked quickly to move all of their things off of it. Several townsmen were helping as well, making the move that much easier. Once they were done, the townsfolk then began pushing the former ship out from the bank, followed by the Black Cat's ship.

As the ships sank, the townsfolk either folded their hands or took off their hats in reverence. Merry closed his eyes with a hand covered his heart, and his voice carried over them. "We thank you for the safe voyages you have provided so far, Sea-Ox. We give back to you so that your beloved creatures will have a new home; the new vessel will be blessed by your currents; and the voyagers will always have a great supply of food while at sea."

"Hmm? What was that?" Luffy asked, cocking his head.

"A sort of prayer to the Sea-Ox." Merry said.

"Who?" Naruto asked.

"Depending on who you ask in the Gecko Islands, the Sea-Ox is either an Ocean Spirit or a god – an ox with eight legs." Kaya smiled as she explained, "It's considered good luck to "give back" to the ocean by sinking a ship that can no longer be used so that fish and other ocean life can have a new place to live; it's also in hopes that your new home will be safe, even during a raging storm."

Shrugging, she added, "Honestly, it's more of a tradition to bless new ships than because of any actual religious practices."

"Does it work?" Gaara asked.

"I'd like to think it does, especially if your crew is on it."

"I don't think any spirit or god will have a hand in us keeping afloat." Zoro shrugged.

Nami whacked his arm hissing, "Have *some* tact!"

With everyone carrying something or having a cart to pull stuff, they were at the docks in under an hour with everything that had been on their previous vessel. By that time, Usopp was coming over the hill with a bag full of everything he needed to take a journey out into the world.

Merry presented the Pirates with their new ship; one he had a personal hand in designing, dubbed, Merry – complete with a sheep's figurehead. All of them grinned.

"A Caravel!" Nami said happily, clasping her hands.

Just then, there was a noise behind them, and screaming. Usopp was careening towards them; stuck to his luggage, looking sick and ready to pass out. Gaara was quick to form a hand and catch him before he crashed into them.

"Thank you, Gaara...urp..."

"Wow, did'ya bring everything short of your house, 'ttebayou?" Naruto asked as he looked at the large bag Usopp had been attempting to carry.

"All the essentials," Usopp replied shakily.

"Let's sort it later." Nami suggested as Gaara lifted it onto the deck.

Luffy let Nami take over learning the instructions of how to steer their

ship, since she was their Navigator. It only made sense.

Once they were loaded, the townsfolk stood back and waved.

"Goodbye, Usopp!"

"Stay safe, Usopp-kun!"

Standing on the dock, Usopp waved at them.

"Goodbye, Captain!" Tamanegi, Piman, and Ninjin tearfully called out.

"Well men," Usopp stood tall. "It's been an honor serving with you. From here on today, the Usopp Pirates are disbanded!" The boys all saluted, not holding back their tears. "You guys go on and live incredible lives, alright?"

"Yes, sir!"

Usopp then turned to Kaya.

"I'm leaving now to become a great warrior of the sea, don't try and stop me." Usopp blushed at his words and awkwardly spoke, "I mean, I want to go...and uh...I'm probably gonna be gone for a long time, so uh...what...what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to study to become a doctor!" Kaya said with a sort of fist pump. She smiled up at him. "I'll work hard. You work hard, too, okay?"

"Ooooi, Usopp!" Luffy called from the ship. "Aren't ya gonna kiss her?"

Usopp spluttered and Kaya laughed.

Naruto then called out, "Ya need to ravish her, Usopp! Bend her backwards and plant one on her, 'ttebayou!"

"WwwhhhhooooOOOooo~!" Tamanegi, Ninjin, and Piman cheered.

By now, Usopp was red as a tomato. Kaya covered her mouth as she laughed even harder, even though she was blushing too. She then put a hand on Usopp's cheek and gave him a kiss on the other one.

"K-Kaya!" Steam seemed to float off of him.

"Be safe, Usopp-kun."

"I think Kaya's the one ravishing *him*." Zoro said with a smirk, as he observed the exchange. Nami and Luffy snickered.

Usopp quickly climbed up the rope ladder and onto the ship.

"I'll be Captain if you ever wanna step down, Luffy!"

"No way!" Luffy objected.

"I won't follow anyone else *but* Luffy." Gaara's monotone voice washed over Usopp, sending a shiver down his spine. "If you ever betray him, I'll kill you. Very slowly. Starting with your toes."

Usopp nearly fainted (again) as he started questioning his life's choices.

"No-one's betraying or killing anyone," Zoro said as he rolled his eyes. "Stop freaking the new guy out, sand-brat." Zoro patted Usopp on the shoulder; though to Usopp it felt as if a crushing weight landed on him with every welcoming pat.

A smile slowly spread on Gaara's face as he poked Usopp's arm. "I was joking."

Usopp gave a weak smile and shivered. "...So scary!"

Zoro smirked. "Welcome to the crew, Usopp."

"Heh...yeah..." Usopp chuckled nervously. Hopefully he'd survive the raccoon kid long enough to survive the Grand Line.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, what, it's like a few more stops until the Grand Line! I want to hurry and get there! Then the story will really pick up!

RIP Buchi and the other nameless crewmembers. RIP Baro-chan, your name was only given in this chapter.

An ox with eight legs? Hmm, wonder who that could be.

Next time... the Baratie Arc.

Akuma no Kanashi sakebi-waza – A Demon's Mournful Cry technique

A Long-Awaited Meal is totally worth it!

What's this? Dessert too? Yosh!

Ittadakimasu~

Chapter Summary

Luffy and his crew run into some old friends of the Roronoa Brother's. An significant problem is realized - they need a cook. So, they set off to the Baratie in the hopes of finding someone who will join them. Luffy sets his sights on a couple of people, and tries to get them to join his crew, although they are very reluctant to do so. Meanwhile, Don Krieg has come along, threatening to take the restaurant over and kill everyone.

Chapter Notes

Baratie Arc is here! I wanted to get this out before Christmas. This chapter is a bit longer than usual, so yay to a few extra paragraphs~ Thank you so much for your support, lovelies!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously:

"Those who took Sword's Spirit beyond this dojo thought that because they had mastered the techniques meant they could never lose. Perhaps it was something else entirely. But the point being, when they reached a mountain they couldn't cut, they let their Swordsman's spirit die. That's what truly killed them. They failed to realize that not all mountains need to be cut; they simply need to be traversed."

[***]

"...We always reach a mountain that we must cut. But when the time comes, we can't always cut it the first time around. It all depends on if you're willing to get up to let yourself risk being the one who is cut. But for many; they can only see the difficult path ahead, and not the goal."

Regret showed in his features as he stared at the sky. "They lose themselves to that seemingly immovable mountain; and let themselves break under its weight."

The hours passed slowly as everyone got into a sort of routine on the ship. Nami kept her eye on the tide and the wind. Zoro worked out with his weights, thankful that this ship was much sturdier and a bit bigger than their other one. Naruto was busy playing a card game with Usopp and Luffy, and Gaara was using trails of his sand to carve twisting, intricate patterns into Merry's figurehead.

Luffy, Usopp, and Naruto's game eventually ended mostly out of boredom, and they began messing with the various things that had come with the ship. Merry only had a few cannons, so defending themselves would likely depend on the crew. But the cannons could serve as a good distraction if they were attacked.

There were several outcroppings of rocks a few miles away, and Luffy pointed it out. There must have been an island here at one point. "Usopp, fire the cannon over there!"

"Yosh! Naruto, load the cannon!"

"Hai~"

Usopp tried not to balk at the ease with which Naruto lifted the cannonball. How strong was the kid? His eyes drifted over to Zoro, who had weights that probably weighed more than him twice over in one hand. The Roronoa Brothers *were* said to be insane... and there was that entire display at the coast with Kuro's crew.

Usopp positioned the cannon and fired at an outcropping of rocks a distance away. He grinned as the rocks shattered. Ah, boys sure enjoyed blowing things up.

"Whoo!" The three of them cheered.

"Let's do another!" Naruto grabbed another cannonball, and Usopp got ready to fire at another outcropping not far from the first.

"Huh?" Luffy cocked his head. He quickly intercepted Usopp's hand. "Wait!"

Usopp was just inches from the wick with the match. "Luffy?"

Luffy pointed to one of the rocks that Usopp was about to fire on. "There's two people there... though... Can you sail us over by those rocks?" Luffy furrowed his brow somewhat. "One of 'em feels really weak. Nami!"

Nami looked up from her map and did as she was told, with Zoro steering. She decided to not question how Luffy knew that because she probably wouldn't get a straight answer. It was easier to just go along; a fact that she was learning very quickly.

When they came around on the other side of the rocks; they found a ship and two people who were resting on a flatter section rocks, an area that looked like some sort of platform. There were two men: one looked exhausted; the other looked sickly pale.

"Who goes there?!" the exhausted one demanded, shakily wielding a sword. He had heard the cannon fire and was just waiting to be fired upon. "Why are you attacking us?"

Zoro blinked and it took a moment to recognize the man. He looked different without that obnoxious Mohawk.

Zoro raised a brow. "Johnny?"

Naruto grinned in realization. "Rooster-kun?"

"No way! Zoro-aniki! Naruto-nii-chan! Gaara-nii-chan!" Johnny had tears in his eyes upon seeing them.

Gaara glanced down at them from his spot on the figurehead. "What happened to Yosaku?"

"I don't know what happened, Gaara-nii-chan." Johnny lamented. "He was fine a few days ago, but then he got an injury that just won't heal and his teeth are falling out..."

"Can I keep his teeth?"

Various members of the crew balked at the morbid request.

"Uh...sure?" Johnny said slowly. "It's not like he can just put 'em back in, I guess..."

"Ehhh..." Luffy cocked his head thoughtfully. "Don't you have to eat food for something like that? To avoid getting sick like that. Stuff like fruit and veggies?"

"What, *now*?" Johnny looked doubtful. "How could my bro eat *anything* with the state he's in?"

"Luffy's right." Usopp hummed. "This sounds like scurvy...right?"

“That’s correct.” Nami sighed. “Honestly, how could you guys *not* prepare for that? Will a couple of you get some lemon or lime juice here? They’re in the fridge; right drawer. Bring a glass, too.”

“I think we should just leave them and let natural selection finish its job.” Gaara said in all of his glowering disappointment. “I *told* them not to die a stupid death.”

Somehow, Nami found herself silently agreeing with Gaara.

Usopp and Luffy both paused to look at the two. Usopp gulped at the glare and laughed awkwardly; Luffy chuckled at the commentary before getting the requested supplies.

Zoro jumped off of Merry and lifted Yosaku over his shoulder to carry him back to their ship where he dropped the man a tad bit roughly. But Yosaku wasn’t complaining, and Johnny went along it because at least Yosaku was getting the help he needed and Zoro’s friends were happy to comply.

Johnny bowed his head in shame as he followed after Zoro. “Sorry...”

“I see you look like less of a rooster without that regret-ridden hair.”

“Heh, yeah...shaved it off end of last year.” Johnny sighed as he boarded Merry, and quickly changed the subject. “How old are you now, Gaara-nii-chan?”

“I turned twelve in January.”

“Ah, you’re growing up so fast, Gaara-nii-chan~” Johnny said as he reached over and ruffled Gaara’s hair. “Though you’re still a cute lil’ pipsqueak.”

“Am not...” Gaara grumbled as he narrowed his eyes, though he didn’t pull away from Johnny; nor did his sand raise up in any sort of defense. Johnny simply laughed at the boy’s sullen expression.

“What are you guys doin’ out here?” Naruto asked as he placed a coat under Yosaku’s head so he would be more comfortable. A few minutes later, Luffy and Usopp returned with the requested fruit. Usopp held the glass while Luffy squeezed the juice in.

“Following leads for a few of the Pirates out here on this side of the Blues. They’re mostly small-time; but there’s talk of Arlong, and frankly, I’m not sure I wanna go up against him.”

Nami stiffened as she listened. No-one was really paying attention to the juice-filling, as the subject of conversation was far more interesting. Though, unbeknownst to her, Luffy frowned a bit as he glanced in her direction.

“Eh, why not?”

“There’re rumors about him taking down a group of Marines who tried to arrest him just two weeks ago... but nothing’s been confirmed. I really don’t think Yosaku and me really stand a chance. I mean, it’s just the *two* of us, and Arlong’s got several men upwards of forty or so?” Johnny shook his head. “Plus, Arlong was on Jinbei’s old crew, and that guy’s a Warlord.”

“Ah!” Usopp realized the juice had leaked onto his leg and he jolted up into a standing position, almost kicking the glass over. It was thanks to Luffy quickly grabbing the glass and pulling it away that none of the juice went to waste.

Looking for a distraction, Nami was the one to help Yosaku drink. Within minutes, Yosaku was on his feet again and he and Johnny were dancing happily and chanting about how good it felt to be healthy.

“Thank you, Aneki!”

“Don’t call me that; it’s Nami. And drinking juice doesn’t work that fast!” Nami yelled. As if on cue, Yosaku collapsed to the deck. Nami sighed. “You still need to rest.”

“Yes, Nami-aneki...” Yosaku mumbled.

“This is an important lesson to us all,” Nami crossed her arms and scowled. “Anyone with a lick of common sense *knows* that they need food and a healthy dose of Vitamin C to not get sick. So,” Nami turned to Luffy, “I’d recommend getting a cook.”

Luffy nodded. “We definitely need one who can make lots of meat...”

“And one that can make ramen, ‘ttebayou!”

“Right!” Luffy frowned thoughtfully for a second with a hand to his chin. It was impressive how well he could focus when food matters were concerned. “*Where* would we find a cook that’ll come to the Grand Line with us?”

“Oh!” Yosaku sat up. “There’s actually a restaurant not far from here

where you could probably find one. Although... I hear they have a scary reputation, but rough and tough guys is what you'd want, right?"

"A...restaurant?" Luffy's mouth watered. "Yosh! Let's get ourselves food and a cook!"

His crew tied the Bounty Hunters' ship to Merry, and they were off.

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The Baratie is a place that is famous in East Blue; people from the other Blues and even the Grand Line make it a purpose to come and dine. It is known for its quirky and colorful fish exterior. But it also has the reputation of its staff being of the rougher variety. It is worth every belli to visit. Their menu often changes, although a few select items have remained consistent. The dessert menu is also a good reason to visit, even if you don't intend to have the main course...

"Wow~" various members of the Pirates piped up excitedly upon seeing the restaurant.

Nami smiled at the fish-shaped restaurant. "It's kind of cute!"

There were several ships already docked, and Nami easily enough navigated them around to dock. At the dock next to them, was a Marine vessel. A man with pink hair was whispering something to a beautiful blonde next to him. By the way they were dressed, this was clearly a date.

"Ah, Fullbody!" Yosaku hissed, quickly trying to hide his face.

"Hide! We can't let him see us!" Johnny agreed as they tried to scramble for cover.

"Huh, why're you guys hiding?" Luffy asked, not really getting what the deal was. They didn't even have their Jolly Rodger yet, so it wasn't like people could know who or what they were.

Johnny and Yosaku's attempt to hide only ended up drawing Fullbody's attention because of how much noise they were making trying to shoo Luffy away.

"Huh?" Fullbody looked at the Merry up and down, before turning his attention onto the ship's occupants. "Wait...aren't you two those worthless Bounty Hunters?"

Both men stiffened and slowly turned around.

“S-so what if we are?” Johnny asked. “What’s it to you?”

“Ha! I heard you guys got your asses handed to you from a crew whose Captain wasn’t even worth 13,000,000 belli!”

“It was 20,000,000...” muttered Yosaku, as if it mattered. He did kinda regret speaking up.

“Whatever.” Fullbody waved them off. He smirked, clearly enjoying his goading of the Bounty Hunters. “So what’s with the crappy ship? Did you finally decide to join a team of competent Bounty Hunters to carry your sorry asses?”

“We aren’t Bounty Hunters,” Luffy piped up. “We’re Pirates.”

“Ah, Luffy, don’t tell him that!” Usopp chided, gripping Luffy’s shirt.

Zoro scowled at Fullbody. He had *never* liked the guy. The only reason he hadn’t punched this guy before was because he was paying him. Gaara had wanted to crush him. Naruto had wanted to use him as a practice dummy. Damn, how much was this guy detested? But now, Zoro could voice his opinion without worry of repercussion – or at least, not that much. What was Fullbody going to do, not pay him? “You’re still the asshole I remember. I really wish your unpleasant sphincter face hadn’t shown up in front of me again.”

Usopp choked and spluttered about not insulting a Marine, while Luffy burst out in laughter. Naruto was covering his mouth and laughing as well; while Gaara laughed openly. Either Gaara had an influence on Zoro; or Zoro had an influence on Gaara.

“What was that, Roronoa?” Fullbody growled. “So all of you decided to quit being Bounty Hunters? To be honest... I’m somewhat surprised the Roronoa Brothers would stoop so low,” Fullbody ignored the glares the two boys were now sending his way. “Although...I’m not at all surprised by you two,” he indicated Johnny and Yosaku. “The worthless lives as Pirates is the only profession that would take you.”

“You’re a real bastard, you know that?” Luffy stated, suddenly serious. “I don’t like you.”

Moodie pulled on Fullbody’s arm in an attempt to hopefully defuse the situation. “Come on, let’s go in. I’m hungry.”

Fullbody scoffed and gave a thumbs-down signal. “Men, sink that ship. It’s unsightly. Especially its crew.”

“Sir!” his men moved at his order.

“Alright, my dear, there is a meal waiting for us.”

Usopp screamed, and Nami froze, terrified. Nearly everyone onboard Merry flinched as the cannon fired – but a large sand-hand grabbed the cannonball. All the Marines stared in shock. The Pirates all looked at Gaara who was glaring specifically at Fullbody.

Luffy cheered. “Good job, Gaara!”

“I’m so glad Gaara is here...” Usopp said tearfully. He’d swear that his life flashed before his eyes. “He’s so reliable!”

Fullbody and Moodie were already near the entrance of the restaurant when the Marine felt the glare on his back and he slowly turned around.

Gaara reared back in a perfect pitcher’s position and threw the cannonball back to where it came from. “FUCK YOU!”

The cannonball shot through the Marine vessel’s deck and out the starboard side. Fullbody gaped as the Marines scrambled to repair the damage and save themselves. Moodie covered her mouth in astonishment.

Now, both Nami and Usopp were spluttering at Gaara about throwing a freaking cannonball back at the Marine vessel. The two were very thankful to be alive of course, but still. And the boy had quite the mouth on him. Johnny and Yosaku could only sigh, accepting this behavior as normal. They were thankfully somewhat used to this.

“You... you brat!” Fullbody screeched. He was shaking. That little... that kid had *always* given him the creeps.

Fullbody merely received a middle-finger gesture from the redhead. Fullbody flinched back and cursed under his breath. He quickly ushered Moodie through the door, determined to not let these things ruin the date he had been planning for weeks. Surely, nothing *else* could go wrong, right?

“Oi, Gaara, I don’t think you should be making the Marines mad.” Usopp whispered fearfully with tears in his eyes. He swore his life had

several years' worth shaved off of it thanks to the redhead.

"Ha, ha, nice one, sand-brat!" Zoro praised, ruffling Gaara's hair.

"Zoro, don't be praising him for such things!" Nami chastised, agreeing with Usopp. "We don't want the Marines on us *before* reaching the Grand Line!"

"What's the big deal, Nami?" Luffy asked. "That bastard was gonna destroy Merry!"

Nami shook her head at this insanity. "I just saying; it could have been handled differently."

"We can't go in with you, I'm afraid, Luffy-aniki." Johnny said. "We can't r-!"

Luffy slapped both the Bounty Hunters on the back. "Just come in like five minutes after we do. Yosaku's still gotta eat, right?"

Both of the Bounty Hunters then proceeded to cry, loudly. "You're such a caring guy, Luffy-aniki!"

The crew quickly made their way into the restaurant. Luffy was excited about finding a cook – he couldn't wait to officially set out to the Grand Line – and he had ideas for his Jolly Rodger and everything.

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The restaurant was filled with the sounds of chatter and people who were definitely enjoying their meals. A blond man wearing a suit was deftly serving the various occupants their food and pouring wine; flirting with the women, much to the chagrin of the men with them.

"Today is made more beautiful because you have graced it with your presence, my lady," Sanji said to a lovely woman. "If you want *anything* specially prepared, just ask for Sanji," Sanji gently kissed her hand, causing her to giggle and blush, "and I will be more than happy to do it."

Sanji turned his attention onto the scowling date. "I'll prepare something for you too, sir, but it'll take a bit of time because the shitty waiters all got fed up with one thing or another and quit."

Sanji spun around to another table that had several high-class women

sitting at it. “Would you lovely ladies like some dessert surprise?”

“Oh, would we!” one of the women chuckled.

“That sounds lovely!”

Sanji had been buttering her and her friends up with flattering words as he doted on their table.

Sanji then called out, “Oh, my darling Sweets-chan! Someone is asking for your delicious treats~”

A young woman with honey-colored hair wearing a maid’s outfit (only because it was what they had on hand since they were short-staffed that day; it also helped that she looked cute in it). She had just finished helping another round of customers smiled excitedly. The majority of her bangs covered her forehead and were pinned in place by a few flowery barrettes, while the rest of her hair was in curly pigtails tied with black ribbon.

“Oh! Coming right up!”

The young woman hurried into the kitchen and came back with a cart filled with a variety of desserts, which were beautifully decorated. The desserts themselves seemed to sparkle and shine whenever the light hit them just right.

Sanji was next to her in seconds as he grabbed a variety of desserts to serve at random. The guests always liked them; they never knew what they were going to get. After all, the desserts were hardly ever the same for long.

“Those desserts are almost as beautiful as you, Pudding-chan.”

“Oh, Sanji-dear, you flatter me.” Pudding winked and gave him a peck on the cheek. She quickly served the ladies their desired desserts, and the dessert was among the best they ever had. No wonder their other friends had spoken so highly of the food!

“Hello,” Pudding greeted a man sitting at another table. Pudding purposefully had her back to his date and leaned forward to emphasize her assets. “Would you like some tiramisu? It’s layered with my own *personal* chocolate and ladyfingers recipe...” Pudding got close enough so that her breath tickled the man’s ear. “...you could lick it off of your spoon and taste *me* in every bite...”

“YES!” the man called out, happily taking the offered dessert, while his date scowled at Pudding.

Pudding merely giggled and winked as she went to see who else may want her desserts.

A few minutes later, and there was a crashing noise. Pudding put a hand to her cheek and half-heartedly lamented, “Oh, no...Sanji-dear’s gone and beaten up another customer...”

Grabbing up a random dessert – a slice of black forest gâteau – expertly pouring a glass of red wine from North Blue – Pudding approached the table where Sanji was holding a man up by his head and telling him how he should respect food. Pudding put on her best smile and placed the dessert and wine in front of the poor woman at the table. Pudding felt sorry for her. A man who didn’t love food and purposely wasted it wasn’t worth any woman’s time.

Moodie was very happy to receive the dessert.

“I apologize for the mess, customer-san, I will clean it up right away. This dessert and wine are on the house, please enjoy them.”

Sanji kicked Fullybody out, then came back over to where Pudding was. He bent down next to her and began helping clean. They both reached for the same piece of broken bowl when their fingers brushed against each other. Pudding blushed somewhat and Sanji had a soft smile.

“Thank you, Sanji-dear.” Pudding said as she gathered the broken dishes. “There’s a group of people who just came in over there...you better get to them before Patty-san scares them off.”

“Yeah.” Sanji mentally griped about that Fullbody bastard, no wonder Marines weren’t popular here. Looking over at the new arrivals, Sanji noticed a beautiful redhead; though she was surrounded by several guys and a couple of kids. She certainly looked beautiful. Sanji quickly approached and smoothly plucked a rose from a nearby vase as he passed by.

“Oh, my beautiful swan!” Sanji got down on one knee and offered Nami the rose. Nami leaned away a bit, looking somewhat uncertain as she accepted the rose. “Anything you want, let me know and you can eat for free!” Sanji scowled at the other guys. “You bastards have to pay full price, though.”

Everyone took their orders, although somewhat grumpily. Usopp tried not to balk at some of the prices. Seriously?! People paid *that* much for a freaking *salad*? That was practically what he had spent every month buying food; and that was just for one person, plus a bit extra for when he had guests. It was Red Line robbery, that's what it was.

Naruto observed the exchange with Nami momentarily before smirking. He had met men like this before. Naruto made a quick hand sign, and with a **POOF** a beautiful blonde was sitting in his seat – although, she was fully clothed this time. Luffy ohhed and ahhed from where he sat; Usopp gaped; Nami's jaw dropped; and Zoro and Gaara continued looking at the menu.

"Excuse me, mister." Naruko shifted and held herself shyly. Sanji's visible eye widened and he was beside Naruko faster than anyone could blink.

A stupid grin was on Sanji's face. "And what would like, my beautiful lady?"

Naruko stroked Sanji's cheek. "Do you...do you have ramen?"

"I can prepare you all the ramen you want!" Sanji promised, though he stopped at Naruko's expression. "My lady, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"I haven't had ramen in years..." Naruko sniffled loudly. She cried even harder. "I'm so happy!"

Shyly turning away, Naruko poked her fingers together. "One last thing... can...can my brothers and I eat for free while the rest pay for half of whatever they eat?" Naruko leaned in close, pressing herself up against Sanji and kissed him on the cheek, resulting in the man turning tomato red. "Pretty please?"

"OF COURSE!" Sanji ran off before he actually considered Naruko's words.

With a puff of smoke, Naruto was back to normal and he smirked victoriously, giving the others a victory sign.

"How did you do that?" Nami asked. She then remembered the seemingly random comment from Gaara – how Naruto would "be a girl" sometimes.

Naruto smirked and wiggled his eyebrows. "What, jealous?"

"I'm not!" Nami shouted. Sighing loudly out of exasperation, Nami leaned back in her chair. While exhausting, this was a useful skill. Their waiter had dropped the price by several hundred belli; and with what amount a few members of the Pirates were able to eat and drink, the savings were substantial.

"Naruto, how long have you been doing well... the flirtatious woman act?"

"Oh, several years," Naruto grinned and laughed. "I realized what I could do when I practiced my *Sexy Jutsu* on Gramps. Then, while we were traveling, I used it on various shop owners to get some stuff that we needed when we didn't have enough money."

That stung Nami a bit – because it reminded her of a time joking with Belle'mere and Genzo... smiling coyly at him and saying, "*I'll pay you back...with my body!*"

Dammit, she tried not to think about it. Nami squirmed a bit when Luffy's eyes were on her.

"You alright, Nami?" Luffy asked. How did he do that?

She smiled with her mask and rested her elbow on the table; then rested her chin in her palm. "I'm fine. Just thinking about how much money we'll save if Naruto keeps up the beautiful woman act."

"Oh! Good idea, Nami." Luffy's expression was...mischievous, and he was thoughtfully sipping his water.

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The door to the restaurant was swung open with a bang, and a lanky, exhausted looking man stood there. He marched in, and his appearance made the other customers uncomfortable. Gin sauntered over to an empty table and sat down.

"Hello, sir," Patty greeted with a smile that most would describe as "scary".

"Gimme food." Gin demanded.

Patty frowned. This guy looked as if he hadn't bathed in a good while, and he certainly smelled like it.

"Do you even have money to pay for your meal, dear customer...?"

“No. Do I look like I have money?”

“Then, dear customer...” Patty reared back a fist and punched Gin. “You can leave quietly without disturbing the other customers! Don’t think I don’t know who you are, *Man-Demon*.”

Gin lay on the floor dazed. Patty grabbed his shirt and was ready to throw him out, when,

“Uncle!”

Naruto ran up to Patty and Gin. Naruto addressed Gin with a pitying, yet tired look. “Uncle, we *told* you where to meet us, and we were worried when you didn’t show, ‘ttebayo...” Naruto sighed and looked up at Patty with his blue eyes. “Please forgive my uncle, mister. He hasn’t been right in the head since his accident six years ago.”

“Oi...” a very confused Gin started.

Ignoring Gin, Naruto leaned in conspiratorially. “He doesn’t shower because he believes there’re brain-eating bugs in the water, ‘ttebayo.”

“No, I don’t-!” Gin was cut off when Naruto kicked his shin. Gin wished he could massage his leg, because that kick had hurt.

“Please let my uncle go now.”

Patty looked incredulous, but then he put on his customer service smile, causing Naruto to mutter “scary” under his breath. Patty put Gin down, and said, “Welcome to the Baratie, you bastards!”

Naruto helped Gin over to sit in a spot with his crew. Everyone introduced themselves and they were friendly enough. Gin felt out of place; especially with how Gaara was staring at him.

“You smell like a shit-pit.”

Gin frowned at the kid. “I haven’t had access to a good shower for a week.”

Looking at Naruto, Gin asked, “Why’d you help me, kid?”

Certainly, they’d be expecting something for this.

“Because you were hungry.” Naruto responded with a smile. That was all there was to it.

Gin didn't believe it. "Really? That's it?"

"I've been hungry and kicked out of places before...so..." Naruto shrugged.

Gin's frown deepened. He noticed how Zoro stiffened and his brow twitched. There was a story there... Usopp frowned as well, looking curious. Nami was looking at Naruto, as if searching for something.

"Well, if you're hungry, eat!" Luffy said with an affirmative nod. "That's all!"

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Since Naruto hadn't specified what kind of ramen he wanted, he got an entire selection. Sanji was disappointed and wondered where the blonde woman had run off to. It was too bad he couldn't watch her enjoy the meal she obviously missed so much.

"Ramen!" Naruto cheered as a bowl was placed in front of him. Since he had some extra, Naruto shoved a bowl in front of Luffy and one in front of Gaara, one in front of Zoro of course, and even one in front of Gin. He had hyped his favorite food up for quite a while.

Sanji sent Gin an expression the other man couldn't read. "This shitty guy's your uncle, kid?"

"...Yeah?"

Sanji ignored the way the answer sounded like a question. "He eats for free too, got it?"

He set a plate of chicken fried rice – a dish no-one sitting down at the table had ordered in front of Gin.

With that, Sanji set everything down. "Enjoy your meals, shitty customers."

Sanji then walked away to complete whatever other tasks he had before taking a welcome smoke break.

Eating the ramen surprisingly slowly, Naruto sighed in contentment. The taste of the egg with the meat...it was so scrumptious! He began slurping down his bowls. It made him homesick, just a bit, thinking of Ayame and Teuchi. While the ramen was absolutely delicious; there was just *something* indescribable that was missing. But if Naruto could

eat this *all* the time, he'd be so happy!

Gaara ate his with a small smile. It was an explosion of flavors in his mouth, and somewhat spicy. It wasn't overbearing. No wonder Naruto had talked about ramen so much.

"It's good."

Gin had no idea what this dish was, but it smelled good and as a starving man he wouldn't complain. He loudly slurped down the meat and noodles. There were tears in his eyes because it was so good.

Naruto beamed at their reactions.

Luffy admired the look and the smell of the ramen. He hadn't had noodles like this before, so he easily copied Naruto and began eating. What a burst of flavor! In fact, Luffy started to cry. When the others looked at him in concern, Luffy turned to Naruto. "We *have* got to get that guy on our crew!"

"Really? Alright!" Naruto cheered.

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Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Sanji sneezed. He didn't really think much of it. He picked up a wine glass to put on a tray when the glass suddenly cracked. Huh...that was strange. Tossing the now useless glass, Sanji picked up another one that inexplicably slipped out of his hand and shattered on the floor. Odd...

He quickly swept up the broken glass and tossed it. The third glass was the charm. When he went to wash a plate, it slipped from his hand and chipped as it broke another plate.

Sanji gulped. This was a bad omen, somehow, he was sure of it. That many broken dishes in such a sort time gave him an odd sense of foreboding. Sanji wished he knew who or what to look out for.

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The customers sitting around the Pirates looked on disapprovingly and muttered about how uncouth they were all being.

"I promised Naruto that he would have ramen to eat and that Zoro needed to eat when we did!" Luffy proclaimed, although Usopp hopelessly tried to shush him, "As a Captain, I *never* go back on my

word!”

“WHHOOOO!!!” Naruto cheered, and Gaara clapped a few times before turning back to his cow tongue.

“Our Captain sure knows how to motivate people.” Zoro commented to the others, and they nodded in agreement.

“You’re Pirates?” Gin asked.

“Yeah!” Luffy rocked in his seat. “And now, I’ve gotta convince that guy to join my crew!”

“Oh, and who would that be?”

A woman’s voice sounded from behind Luffy. He turned and looked up at Pudding, who had a soft smile.

“Oh, forgive me... I just overheard some of your conversation. Who would you like to join your crew?”

“He said his name was Sanji!” Luffy said.

Mild annoyance wafted off of the woman. She cocked an eyebrow. “Him? Why?”

“Because he can make ramen.”

The feeling was now a bemused curiosity. “... ‘Ramen’? Isn’t that a noodle dish?”

“Yeah, it’s the best!” Naruto said. “He’s the only one who can make it, so Sanji *has* to come with us!”

Pudding walked up to Gin with a small plate that had a variety of pastries. “Dear customer, please, take these. They are on the house for you.”

Gin stared at her. “Why?”

“Because no-one should ever go hungry, and they always should be able to enjoy the love a chef puts into their dishes.” Pudding smiled softly. “And just once, a person should be able to enjoy a dessert that makes their hearts happy.”

Gin took a bite from one of the pastries – he only knew that it was fruity; a mix of strawberries and blueberries, and it was delicious. He

began crying.

“You and that guy...why are you so kind?”

Pudding let out a quiet laugh. Out of the two of them, she would say only Sanji was kind. She smiled at Gin, what a silly, adorable one he was.

“...Because you were hungry.”

“Eh, Sanji’s a good guy, huh?” Luffy said with a laugh.

“Yes, he is.” Pudding agreed.

“You’re pretty nice, too.”

Pudding paused to look at Luffy. A feeling like bitter regret washed over him.

She sent the Captain a wry smile. “You think so, darling customer?”

“I know it.”

There needed to be change of topic. She then put a hand on her dessert cart. “Darling customers... I’m so glad so many handsome men are here. Would you like to try some of my sweets? My blood, sweat, and tears went into perfecting these recipes.” Pudding leaned down to Naruto and Gaara, who were sitting next to each other. “Such cute darlings as well. What would you like?”

“I’ve never really had dessert before, so...” Naruto blushed a little as he murmured and shrugged.

“I don’t really like sweet things.” Gaara replied.

“Alright, a special surprise then!” Pudding placed several desserts on the table. “You’ll have to tell me what you think before you leave. Have a good day, darling customers.”

“We didn’t order all these.” Nami said. But that orange meringue looked good.

“Oh, the men don’t have to pay for the desserts.” Pudding said with a sweet smile. “But *you* do.”

Pudding walked away with a laugh while Nami protested.

“You weren’t protesting when you didn’t have to pay and we did.” Gaara said flatly.

Nami blushed. “That-that’s different!”

“I don’t see why...”

“She’s jealous,” Naruto theorized to Gaara.

“I am not! Stop saying that!”

Nami shook her head. She *was not* paying for all those desserts! That maid-bitch gave them so many desserts on *purpose*! And she *wasn’t* jealous!

The meal was very filling. Gin wondered how his crew was doing.

“So...” Gin cleared his throat. “What do you people plan to do?”

“I’m gonna go become the Pirate King.”

“*WHAT?!*” Gin stood up so fast, he knocked his chair over. He drew the attention of everyone in the restaurant. Absolute fear and dread hit Luffy; feeling like a Haki-enforced punch. It banged around in his head. Luffy actually had to massage his temple due to the intensity of it. “That means going to the Grand Line!”

“Well, yeah.” Luffy said in a ‘well, duh’ tone. “That’s where One Piece is. I wanna find it.”

“It’s also where monsters live and where people die!” Gin shouted. “My-our crew...there were 5,000 of us, and we...!” Gin was shaking; looking even paler than before. “On just the seventh day of our journey, we were wiped out by one man! And he didn’t even *have* a proper ship! *Hawk-Eyes* Dracule Mihawk!”

“Mihawk?” Zoro’s hand subconsciously reached for Wado Ichimonji, and his brothers both looked at him, knowing what was going through his mind.

“There’s only a hundred of us left, and we barely even survived the return trip!”

Fear from Usopp and Nami hit Luffy as well, not really helping things.

“Mihawk, hmm?” an old chef walked up to their table after hearing the commotion. “You probably interrupted his nap. He’s always been

a rather extreme individual.”

“His nap?! His *nap*?! *That’s* why he wiped us all out?!” Gin angrily demanded.

“Hell,” the old chef merely shrugged. “Maybe you crossed his path on a bad day. Mihawk’s reasons are his own.”

Gin turned back to Luffy. “If you care about your crew *at all*, you’ll stop this foolishness and *stay* in East Blue! If only we had known what we do now, then-!”

“Shut up.” Luffy’s expression was hidden by his hat. Something hit Gin that simply told him, **shut up** and **obey**. Slamming his hands down on the table, Luffy stood up. “Are you doubting my crew? I didn’t leave my home island for nothing! *None* of us did! Nothing in this world is worth having if you aren’t willing to risk your life!”

Gin stood frozen on the spot. Luffy’s crew looked up at him with growing respect and admiration. *This* was the man who was worthy of being their Captain.

“I don’t know if I’ll become Pirate King, but I’m willing to die trying.”

“Then you’re a fool.” Gin said quietly. Why did this kid have so much conviction for a fool’s errand?

“Then we’ll die as fools who fought for their dreams.”

Gin could only stare, not knowing how to respond. But the old chef was laughing.

“I’ll be damned, well-spoken, kid.”

“Who’re you?” Luffy asked, finally turning his attention to the older man.

“I’m Zeff, the owner of this fine establishment.”

“I’m sorry about the noise,” Nami said quickly.

“It’s alright, girl.” Zeff replied. “It’s been many years since I’ve met a man with that sort of passion. The Grand Line’s no joke. There are people more terrifying than even Mihawk there, and he’s one of the tamer ones. You’ve got to know what you want and be willing to risk everything for it – without regret.”

Gin sighed. “I guess you aren’t gonna listen to me?”

“Nope!” Luffy childishly stuck out his tongue.

Gin scoffed. Well, he tried.

“Sir...” Gin turned to Zeff. “I know that this is asking a lot, but Krieg and the rest of my crew, they’re probably starving by now. Could I get some food for them?”

“You think you can just take advantage of Chef Zeff’s hospitality?!” Patty demanded, backhanding Gin. “We aren’t running a charity!”

“Enough, Patty.” Zeff sighed. “Go on and bring ‘em.”

“But...Zeff!” Carne argued. “Krieg can’t be trusted!”

“I’ll make sure he honors the deal!” Gin promised quickly. “I want Krieg to taste the amazing flavors, and maybe...maybe his heart will be moved too, like mine was.”

“Well, alright. There’s a spare boat at the dock, out that door there. It has the Baratie’s logo on it.”

Gin thanked Zeff once again and quickly left. His crew would be saved!

“Thanks for the food,” Luffy said with a clap of his hands. He then gave a determined nod. “Alright, Naruto, come with me!”

“Yes, Luffy!”

Luffy closed his eyes and focused his Haki. Sanji felt like fire; except it felt as if it was hidden under something. There was passion and something else.

He was sitting outside, along with Pudding – she was another interesting one. She had a lot of passion; and it was mixed with both love and malice. There seemed to be a hunger there as well.

Luffy put a hand on his hat as he smirked. “I think I just found two very interesting people.”

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Sanji and Pudding were sitting out on the deck, overlooking the ocean. The sounds of seabirds and the usual cacophony of shouts from

inside and outside the Baratie could be heard. Sanji took a slow drag from his cigarette, while Pudding scribbled recipe ideas in her notepad.

This was their norm. They could come out here and sit in companionable silence.

"I met some interesting people today." Pudding said after a moment.

Sanji glanced at her. "Oh?"

"It was the table with that hungry man and the kid who ordered all that ramen." Pudding tucked away the notepad. "They were talking about asking you to join them," when Sanji gave her a raised eyebrow, she shrugged, "Because you can make ramen."

Sanji scoffed. "That's not really a reason."

"...Would you consider it?"

"Nope. I ain't leavin' this shitty restaurant to the shitty geezer."

Pudding gave a soft laugh, and she understood. "I thought not."

They didn't really pay attention to the door opening; since neither of them thought that they would be bothered.

"Found ya," Luffy said as he walked up to them with a face-cracking grin. Naruto stood close by as well, watching the exchange, with an equally face-cracking, foxy grin. "Oi, Sanji, right? I'm Monkey D. Luffy. Join my crew as a Cook."

"D?" Pudding questioned.

"Hell, no." Sanji said.

"Oh, come *on!*" Luffy whined. He then turned to Pudding. "Do you wanna join too?"

"Me?" Pudding pointed to herself. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to refuse, sweetie."

"Alright, then." Luffy crossed his arms stubbornly. "I'm gonna refuse!"

"Refuse what?" a confused Sanji asked.

"I'm gonna refuse your refusals. So there, *now* you gotta come!"

"That's not how it works!" Sanji shouted, while Pudding laughed.
"Pudding-chan, you're encouraging him!"

"But he's so cute!"

Luffy pouted. "I didn't want to do this...but...Naruto!"

"Sexy Jutsu!"

With pink smoke covering certain areas; Naruko hugged Sanji's arm, and pressed up against him. "Pretty please, mister! Join us so I can eat *all* the ramen I want!"

Naruko put on her best pouting and pleading face.

Sanji's visible eye turned into a heart, he blushed red and blood started pooling out of his nose. "Yes! *NO!*" Sanji quickly pulled away and staunchly turned his back on Naruko. His voice was also deeper as he did his best to resist. "I have to refuse as well. I simply can't leave."

"Oohhh..." Naruko whined. "But it was so good!"

Sanji was sweating. "Please don't beg, my beautiful...wait, no...!"
Sanji gritted his teeth in hot determination. "I have to refuse, even if it's a..." he turned back briefly and chuckled, but quickly turned around and cleared his throat, "...beautiful woman's calls!"

Sanji then turned on Luffy, yelling, "What the hell, what are you teaching this shitty brat?!"

With another poof of smoke, Naruto was back to normal. He pouted as he glared at Sanji.

"Damn, I really thought that would work." Luffy muttered in disappointment.

"What sort of Devil Fruit was that?" Pudding asked. There was only one person she had heard of who had an ability like that, and he was supposedly in Impel Down.

"I haven't eaten a Devil Fruit. That was a Jutsu." Naruto pointed proudly at himself, "One I made up on my own, 'ttebayou."

Pudding looked confused. "Eh...Jutsu?"

"Well, you almost said yes, so why not?" Luffy stubbornly asked.

“Damn you, playing dirty like that.” Sanji huffed. “Because...the shitty geezer...we...we owe him.”

“Why do you want us to join you so badly, sweetie?”

“Because I’m gonna be the Pirate King, and I need an amazing Chef. Having *two* people who make food is even better.”

“Isn’t there anything you wanna do, though?” Naruto now questioned. “I mean, sure, you wanna stay here and cook for the old man, but...is that all?”

“You’re a pretty blunt kid, huh?” Sanji lit up another cigarette. “Have either of you ever heard of All Blue?”

Both Luffy and Naruto shook their heads in the negative.

“It’s a place where all the world’s oceans meet as one. Every kind of fish lives there.” Sanji’s eyes lit up as he spoke of the rumored ocean that was supposed to have every kind of ingredient imaginable.

“Think about it; fresh and salt-water fish all in one place! It’s ridiculous and impossible, but somewhere out there it exists, it *has* to!”

Sanji sweat-dropped at the three people whose mouths were watering.

“You’ve heard this story as much as I have, Pudding-chan...”

“Just imagining it makes me hungry!” Pudding said with a passionate blush and a tear in her eye. “All those ingredients! Think of the possibilities!”

“Then that totally means you’ve gotta come, ‘tebayou!” Naruto said excitedly pumping his fists. “All of us wanna do impossible things, so let’s go!”

“What about you?” Luffy asked Pudding.

“I want to open a traveling bakery that sails through all the Blues, and the Grand Line.” Pudding’s mouth watered even more as she thought about it. “I’ll use local ingredients from wherever I am, and *always* have something different!”

Up above on a higher deck, Zeff looked down at those two brats talking to a couple of those interesting kids.

“They all have such big dreams, huh?”

Now if only those two would bother to actually live them.

0000

It was in the early morning hours that Carne announced, "There's a ship on the horizon! It has Don Krieg's flag!"

The chefs were clearly nervous, but Zeff simply grunted and motioned with a jerk of his thumb towards the kitchen. "Let's get cooking. We have hungry mouths to feed."

His chefs protested half-heartedly, but didn't argue. There was plenty of complaining on their part though, as they prepared meals. Only Sanji and Pudding worked silently.

Out on Luffy's ship, both Johnny and Yosaku were on edge as well.

"This is really bad..." Yosaku said. "Don Krieg isn't a man we want to be messing with. He has a bounty of 17,000,000."

"Then as long as he leaves us alone, we won't have a problem." Luffy replied.

"He's not that impressive." Gaara stated factually, not even looking up from where he was rolling several balls of sand around where he was sitting. "Remember Shit-Pit saying that there had been 5,000 of them?"

Mostly ignoring Gaara's nickname for Gin, the others nodded.

"His bounty is only that high because of the threat he poses as in; willingness to hurt civilians, the size of his crew, his unpredictability and underhanded tactics." Gaara shrugged as he rolled the sand balls into one. "His true value isn't worth that much."

"Gaara's probably right," Naruto had to agree. "Krieg's a real bastard, ttebayou."

Luffy frowned, as he stared out at the horizon. His crew and the Bounty Hunters continued talking, but Luffy was only half-paying attention. There was something prickly in the air that was causing his hair to stand on end.

It most definitely *wasn't* that Krieg guy. A man who only lasted a week on the Grand Line wouldn't feel like this. Luffy took a deep breath and focused; trying to reach out with his Haki. Krieg was out there, along

with Gin and several others. But something was out there, further behind them, slowly following. It was the tiger stalking its prey. That person was terrifyingly strong; and a bead of sweat rolled down Luffy's temple from the feel of simply brushing against that person.

"---do you think Luffy?" Usopp said, drawing Luffy's attention away from whoever it was out there.

"Huh? What?"

"Do you think we should leave and then come back?" Usopp asked. "To avoid running into Krieg."

"Naw, we're staying until Sanji and Pudding agree to come with us."

Nami could only sigh. "Of course you'd say that. You really shouldn't keep pestering them."

"I'll stop if you officially join my crew."

Nami raised her eyebrow dubiously. "Really?"

"No." Luffy laughed at Nami's annoyed expression.

Luffy waved off their concerns. "There shouldn't be a problem as long as they don't bother us."

0000

The atmosphere in the Baratie was tense. Krieg did eventually arrive as Luffy and his crew, along with the Bounty Hunters were having breakfast in the restaurant.

Krieg was tall; and was an odd mix of being both muscular and lanky. After quickly wolfing down an offered meal from Sanji, Krieg punched Sanji and sent him flying into the opposite wall.

Pudding nearly pulled out her carving knives and gutted Krieg right then and there. At least he had a delicious last meal. Zeff simply put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head.

In spite of Gin's begging, "I promised them that we wouldn't fight!"

Krieg turned around and punched Gin in the stomach, leaving him slumped and coughing on the floor.

Krieg still had the nerve to demand food and he laughed as he talked

about taking over the *Baratie*, because of its unassuming appearance. He bragged that it would be a good ship to use to attack unsuspecting people.

“Hey, that’s *my* Cook you just punched!” Luffy shouted as he stood up.

“I’m not your Cook!” Sanji shot back as he stood up like the punch was nothing.

Since one of their own had been attacked, both Patty and Carne were the ones who were willing to get into the fray. Hell, they’d lead the charge and Zeff could put his remaining foot up and lean back and relax.

“Both of you, stand down!”

“But... Chef Zeff!” Patty didn’t look happy.

“Zeff...?” Krieg jerked in realization before smirking. “So you’re *Red Leg* Zeff! Ha! Gin told me that you were here, and this just confirms it. What a score! I’m going to take this ship *and* your life!”

“You bastard!” one of the other chefs shouted.

“Just bring them the food we’ve prepared.” Zeff ordered far too calmly, considering the situation. “It’s a Chef’s job to feed those who are hungry.”

A large sack of food was delivered. “Give this to your men.”

Krieg laughed as he carried it out. Before he left, he smirked at Zeff. “I heard that you recorded your adventures in a logbook, isn’t that right? You’re going to give it to me when this is over.”

Krieg walked out, and he could be heard shouting, “Eat up, men! We’ll be taking this ship over when we’re through!”

Yells and cheers responded.

“I-I’m sorry.” Gin apologized as he bowed.

“Go eat.” Zeff replied.

Gin bowed again.

“How can you follow that bastard?!” Naruto demanded. He ignored Usopp’s attempts to thwart Gin’s attention from them.

“Don Krieg is a good man, he’s just—!” Gin started, but he was interrupted by Naruto slamming his fist on the table, rattling the dishes.

“He’s *not!*” Naruto shouted as he stood, leaving the others to simply sit and watch the exchange. “He’s a two-faced bastard! He *lied* about coming here peacefully, he hit *both* you and Sanji, he threatened the old man, *how* can you follow him, Dattebayo?!”

“You wouldn’t understand! You’re just an ignorant kid, and Don Krieg is a leader--!”

He was cut off again as Naruto insisted, “He’s no leader! He doesn’t care about his crew! All of you nearly died, and barely recovered and he’s willing to risk your lives again so soon and for what?!”

“We just need to start over!” Gin shouted back. He didn’t know why he was defending himself and Krieg to this kid. But he didn’t like hearing what Naruto was saying. It wasn’t about insulting his loyalty to Krieg; it was about voicing those doubts deep in the back of his mind that he did his best to ignore. “We were ignorant about the dangers, but once we know what we’re dealing with, then we can...we can...” Gin sighed as he added quietly, “We can survive next time.”

“He’ll lead you to your graves, ‘ttebayou.”

Naruto thought back to the time he had first heard about Hokage from Gramps so long ago.

“Gramps told me about being Hokage,” at the confused look he received from Gin, Naruto said, “Hokage is the title for the leader of my home village, and to be the Hokage you’ve gotta be amazingly strong – you have to be the best. My dad was the Fourth Hokage of my village, and he died defending it because he loved the village.” Naruto then stared at Gin with intense blue eyes. “Is Krieg willing to die for you?”

Gin didn’t like that he couldn’t answer.

“I...I have to go.” Gin ducked out, not liking the doubts loudly plaguing his mind.

Pudding went to check on Sanji; and he put his hand on hers, giving her a serious look. Pudding looked downcast, but her expression showed that she wasn’t going down without a fight. The Baratie would only be taken if those fools could get passed them.

An island somewhere in North Blue; Nine Years Ago:

[...]

Sanji stared out the window and frowned. It was pouring rain today. He took in the sight of Big Mom's strange food-inspired factory several blocks away. The animated factory was wiggling like Jell-O, and the voices of the towers could be heard complaining about getting wet.

Sanji didn't know much about those people, and he had been told to stay away from them. His father had made some kind of deal with them; not that it mattered much to him. He moved quickly, darting through the various pathways trying to make sure that he wasn't caught. He also didn't want the food he had worked so hard on to get ruined.

Sanji turned a corner and bumped into someone, where he subsequently dropped the food. At first, there was some mild panic because he didn't know who had run into him. The boy looked at the girl laying on the ground.

"Hey, you alright?" he asked as he pulled her up. Her hair was covering her face. It was a motion that he had learned from his mother, so he pushed her wet bangs aside – when she slapped his hand away.

"No! Stop!"

But she could tell that the boy had seen it – her eye. Except...he didn't look disgusted. In fact, he looked curious; amazed even.

"That eye...it's so pretty! Just like topaz!"

Pudding didn't know how to respond. She quietly asked, *"You...you really think its pretty?"*

"Yeah-oh! The food!" Sanji hurried to pick everything up. Silently, Pudding helped him.

"I'm Sanji by the way."

"...Pudding."

In the dim light, Sanji frowned at her. *"Did something happen to you?"* Pudding jerked and looked at him. *"Um...I mean, you can come with me to see my mom. She can help you get cleaned up."*

“...Okay.”

Sanji led her to a room in one of the buildings, where he happily greeted his mother, Sora. She was sitting up in bed reading a book. She smiled when she saw Sanji. *“Hello, sweetie.”*

But it seemed that today her son wasn't alone.

“Oh, hello.” Sora smiled at Pudding. *“Sanji-kun's never brought a friend to visit before.”* Sora had a worried expression as she took in Pudding's appearance. *“You're absolutely soaked, dear. Let's get you into some warm clothing.”*

Sora eased herself out of bed to grab a shirt for the girl. It would certainly serve like a dress until the one Pudding was wearing was dry.

Grabbing a towel as well, Sora got down on her knees in front of Pudding. *“Let's dry you off.”*

Sora noticed the third eye, but said nothing to indicate negativity. While it was a surprise, it wasn't unusual. She had read about the Three-Eyed Tribe some time ago.

“Are you visiting here with your family? Is there a way to contact them?”

“...Big Mom is my family.” Pudding murmured, not looking up at Sora.

Sora noticed the bruises; ones very similar to what Sanji had sometimes. She frowned just for a moment.

“Doesn't her eye look just like topaz, mom?” Sanji asked, smiling. In the light of the hospital room, he could see other colors within the third eye. Blues, reds, yellows and greens; giving it a mystical quality.

“Yes, it's very lovely.” Sora agreed. *“Let's get those scrapes cleaned up now.”*

Pudding's cheeks heated up, but she said nothing. Sanji was chattering about food and Sora was agreeing with him, but the fact of the matter was; they were both kind. Sanji thought that her eye was pretty, and Sora was gentle.

“W-why?” Pudding finally asked. Tears slowly began to form. *“Why do you think its so...my eye...no-one's ever...”*

"I just like it." Sanji hummed factually.

"But...it's...I'm flawed." Pudding said quietly, unable to stop the tears. At the confused expressions of the mother and son pair, she explained, *"Members of the Thee-Eye Tribe are supposed to be able to read a certain ancient language,"* Pudding didn't dare tell them what it was, because any hint of outside knowledge of the Poneglyphs her mother owned would result in death. Pudding wouldn't and couldn't do that to them; not after showing her kindness. *"But when I saw the language, I couldn't read it. I tried, I really did, but..."*

The memory of her mother's disappointment burned.

"What? You can't read it? I thought the Three-Eyed Tribe could do that! I seduced that man for nothing! Useless girl, what good are you if you can't read this?!" Offhandedly, she added, *"I suppose you'll be useful for something else..."*

"Cover that useless, disgusting eye up, I don't want to be reminded of your failure."

Pudding had sat for hours, staring intently at those blocks, desperately trying to force herself to understand the words. She could write down the meaningless symbols by memory; but it never did any good. She was useless. There were only a few siblings who wouldn't laugh at her, and even fewer who would stick up for her.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Sanji, who was talking about even more exuberantly about food. Unfortunately, the food had gotten ruined when Sanji bumped into her and the basket carrying all of its contents fell. But Sanji just laughed it off and said he would make more, and Sora smiled and said that she would love to eat whatever Sanji made.

Pudding ate some of the offered food. It was strange; the food was most certainly ruined, but it tasted delicious as she sat there with Sanji and Sora, chatting about anything and everything. It was a nice feeling, and she wanted it to last forever.

After that, Pudding began going with Sanji as he prepared various kinds of food, and Pudding started making desserts. They always met at the corner under the streetlight where they had run into each other. Sanji was always there, waiting for her.

"I want to have a traveling bakery someday, you know." Pudding said to Sanji one day. She didn't mind sharing her dream with him. *"I'll make*

amazing desserts from all kinds of local ingredients, it'll never be the same thing twice!"

"That's amazing, Pudding-chan!" Sanji said, his eyes sparkling. *"I'll be a chef, one of the best!"*

"Do you..." Pudding blushed thanks to her nerves. *"Would you want to work together?"*

"Yeah..." Sanji smiled. *"That'd be great."*

A few days a week, Sora was subject to a pair of kids and their cooking and baking attempts. How they spoiled her so! Pudding was opening up and smiling more, and it was wonderful to listen to the two of them talk about recipes. She was glad, because Sanji was kind, and Pudding clearly needed a friend.

Pudding and Reiju got along surprisingly well. She would braid Pudding's hair and complain about the boys in her life. Pudding listened, because it was nice that she could be someone's confidant. Some days, when Reiju was there, she would show Pudding various fighting maneuvers, but never told her why. Reiju was very much the older sister Pudding wished she could have; with only a few exceptions.

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Pudding was no fool. She easily noticed the various bruises Sanji got. He often had some sort of ridiculous excuse for them.

"I tripped and fell into a door," he'd laugh. *"I'm clumsy like that."*

"Yeah..." Pudding narrowed her eyes at him. *"I've tripped and fell into lots of doors, too."*

One day, Sanji didn't come to their usual meeting spot. It was strange, because he was always the first one there. Why wasn't he here? Pudding sat there for hours, waiting. After a while, she felt like a fool. Sanji had left her too, just like everyone else! But rational came through before she could do anything rash. Since when had Sanji *ever* broken a promise to her?

Now worry replaced her anger. Something wasn't right. Thoughts of what could potentially be wrong raced through her mind.

Just in case, Pudding ran to see Sora; and if Sanji was there – or at

least, maybe she knew where Sanji was.

The sight that greeted Pudding was an unexpected one. The bed was empty and the room had been stripped bare. A sickening feeling settled in Pudding's gut, but... no, maybe Sora had been moved somewhere else.

Stopping a nurse – one who knew her and Sanji, Pudding asked, *“What happened to Sora-san?”*

The nurse looked sad as she knelt down to Pudding's level. *“Sora-san passed away late Wednesday night... I'm sorry.”*

Pudding started crying. Did they even have a funeral for Sora? Did they even care that she died? It would have been the top-most topic of the Charlotte Family's gossip chain if they had... Something burned inside of her. The Vinsmokes didn't care about their family.

Then the thought of Sanji, compelled her to ask, *“Where-where's Sanji?”*

“I don't know...I haven't seen him since Monday...I'm sorry, I have to go.”

Pudding hurried outside, eventually made her way between two large buildings across from the Vinsmoke's factory. What was she going to do? She snuck towards the Vinsmoke's mansion, making sure to stay out of sight. Finally, she came upon a guard.

“Excuse me...” she said quietly, and the guard glared at her. She ignored the glare and maintained an air of politeness. *“Can you tell me where Sanji is?”*

“Get lost, kid.”

Something burned in Pudding's forehead. She was angry. Angry that someone had prevented Sanji from coming to her. Angry that the death of Sora had been kept under wraps and only a few people even cared. Angry that this guard wouldn't tell her what she wanted to know.

Grabbing the guard's arm before he could walk away, Pudding's bangs shifted in the struggle as he tried to shove her away.

“Tell me where Sanji is!”

The guard froze as he stared at her eye. White strings with a rainbow-

colored hue flowed from the guard's forehead into Pudding's mind. Suddenly, she had memories – memories she didn't remember but remembered at the same time – flooding her mind, and her head *hurt*. The guard collapsed to the ground, moaning intelligibly.

Pudding nearly passed out herself, stumbling terribly. She had to reach out to the nearby building to steady herself.

“What...what was that? How am I remembering this?”

The point was, she now *knew* where Sanji was. She saw him in a cell, wearing a mask. He was calling for help, begging and pleading. Sanji was crying.

Pudding was furious. They dared to keep Sanji from her. He was *her* friend, what right did they have to keep him from her? She kicked the guard in the face a few times to make herself feel better. Then, she noticed the dagger in the sheath at the guard's thigh.

Grabbing the knife, she wasn't sure if she'd need it, Pudding managed to make her way to the dungeon. Sneaking around her own home and learning how to avoid being spotted by numerous living objects certainly helped train her for avoiding being seen by mere Human guards.

There were two guards stationed outside the entrance to the dungeon. Pudding pushed her bangs back. Could she do what she did to that other guard?

“Let me in the dungeon.”

“Why would we do that?” one guard asked.

The other sneered at her. *“Kids aren't supposed to be here.”*

“Let me in, dammit!”

Why wasn't it working now?

“Get lost kid.”

Pudding was ready to stab those bastards in the legs and carve out their kneecaps. She didn't understand why the one guard let her have what she wanted and why these two wouldn't listen. Was it some sort of hypnotism? How the command or question was phrased?

“Let us in.”

Pudding turned at the sound of Reiju's voice. Reiju looked serious, as she marched forward with purpose. The other girl didn't even break her stride as she silently motioned for Pudding to follow her.

Reiju slowed down just a bit, and when Pudding was ahead, Reiju went full smack-down on the two guards; effectively knocking them out.

"What...?" Pudding started.

"I'm getting my brother out of here. What about you?"

"Same thing..."

Feeling like a bundle of nerves, Reiju took out a key from her pocket. Pudding wasn't sure what it was for; but she could guess, as it was far too small for a cell door key.

Sanji was of course surprised to see both of them. He was a terrible sight to behold: filthy, bruised, bloody, and bandaged. Even just moving to sit up made him wince in pain and he put a hand to his side.

Sanji looked at both girls. *"What are you doing here?"*

"We don't have much time," Reiju said as she handed the key to Pudding. *"Any longer in here and Dad'll have you killed."*

Reiju bent the bars, and Sanji slowly stepped out. Pudding quickly removed that horrible mask and tossed it aside.

"Pudding-chan..."

"You jerk!" Pudding hit Sanji's shoulder and ignored his pained protest before hugging him. *"You weren't there waiting for me and I was so worried..."* She was scared that he had left her behind. That she no longer mattered to him. *"Don't do it again."*

"I'm sorry, Pudding-chan."

"Alright, alright, you two." Reiju killed the mood by quickly grabbing Sanji's arm and led him out to the docks with Pudding following behind. The older girl was clearly nervous, but was doing a good job of containing her worry.

They stopped at the edge of the water, just where the dock began.

"There's a ship, get on it and never come back, Sanji." Reiju ordered.
"You go and live your dreams. It's what mom would have wanted."

Sanji stared at the ship for just a moment. He turned back to look at his sister and Pudding. Reiju was looking around nervously; while Pudding was staring at him with an almost hurt and scared expression.

"Pudding-chan..." Sanji started quietly, before he smiled. *"Come with me!"*

"What?"

"Come with me! You said you wanted a traveling bakery, right?" Sanji held out his hand expectantly. *"I want to be a Chef; we'll be an unbeatable team."*

"Come on," Reiju motioned with her hands, *"if you're going to decide, now's the time to do it!"*

Pudding reached out and took Sanji's hand. His beaming smile faded when he glanced up at something behind her and his eye widened in fear. Reiju swiveled around as well, her expression...she was terrified.

"Father..."

"What do you think you're doing, Reiju?" Judge's voice was harsh and cold. *"Sanji, what are you doing out of your cage?"*

"Looks like our dear brother wants an extra beating, eh?"

"Who's the girl?"

"Reiju, I hope you realize how much trouble you're in, helping him." Judge turned his cold focus onto Pudding. *"You belong to Big Mom, don't you? I don't appreciate one of her brats running around here without reason."*

"I can explain, Father!" Reiju's back was to her and Sanji as she stepped protectively in front of them.

Pudding was furious upon hearing their words. She spun around, her hair had come undone enough that her bangs no longer covered her third eye.

"How creepy..." one of the brothers murmured with a mocking smirk, while the others snickered.

They dared to try and take Sanji away from her. They dared to try and stop him from leaving. They dared to threaten Reiju. *Something* in Pudding felt like it *snapped*, almost like it had when she had been talking to the guard.

“Leave Sanji alone!” Pudding loudly demanded, bringing all the attention to her. Reiju didn’t dare turn around, because that would mean taking her attention off of the threat, and that was something one should *never* do.

Numerous white, luminescent strings with a rainbow hue looking like unraveling threads shot out of Judge, Ichii, Niji, and Yonji’s foreheads; into Pudding’s third eye. Memories began assaulting her; both as if she were an observer and carrying out the actions herself. There was a snapping sound, and Pudding, along with Judge, Ichii, Niji, and Yonji all collapsed. Sanji was quick to catch Pudding as she fell.

“Pudding!”

Unlike the Vinsmokes though, Pudding was still awake. She stared up at Sanji crying. *“I’m so sorry, Sanji... I didn’t know...”*

Reiju slowly turned to look at Pudding. What *was* that? She hadn’t seen or ever heard of anything like whatever that was. She’d have to think about it later. *“Both of you, go! Now!”*

Sanji hoisted Pudding up and carried her to the ship. This would be a chance for a new life for both of them.

With Reiju, she quickly retrieved several guards to help her carry her father and brothers to the medical building. They were simply unconscious; not injured at all.

Judge and his sons woke up several hours later; confused about how they had gotten there.

“What’s going on?” Judge asked, massaging his temples. His head felt as if something was trying to rip its way out. He glanced at Reiju, who was guiltily sitting on a chair positioned at the foot of his bed. Damn...the last thing he remembered... *“Why were you at the docks, Reiju?”*

“Father,” Reiju began, desperately wanting to explain herself and hoping she could get out of it. *“About Sanji...”*

Judge frowned. *“Who’s Sanji?”*

“Huh?” Reiju said dumbly, looking at him in surprise.

“I asked, ‘who is Sanji?’” he repeated, patience clearly already thin.

What...? Reiju was confused. Why didn’t father... those weird, white strings... She wondered – should she risk it? Would it work?

“Sanji is a mutt I found... That’s why I was at the docks. I gave it away to a ship as a rat-catcher. It seemed to be the most logical decision.” Reiju explained, completely serious. *“I just didn’t want you to think I was keeping anything away from you. I apologize. Please get plenty of rest, Father, brothers.”*

All of them stared at her blankly. There was no recognition on their parts. Reiju couldn’t believe it, and she expertly kept her expression impassive as she bowed and then quickly left.

Judge couldn’t remember anything about a dog. There was a blank space where...*something* should be – he just couldn’t recall. He remembered being at the docks, for whatever reason. He was talking to Reiju, and that three-eyed girl was there as well. She had looked at him angrily, and suddenly he was here. His head was still killing him.

“Damn, my head hurts...” complained Yonji.

“Why would Reiju name a dog Sanji?” Nijii questioned himself.

“What knocked us out?” Ichii asked. *“I just remember that weird three-eyed girl...”*

Judge glared at his clenched fists. Had Big Mom been planning something? Was that why that Three-Eyed girl there? Had she been spying? A child would be overlooked in most cases. He had heard rumors of an unfamiliar girl spending time with Sora. What was her ploy?

Judge’s head throbbed again, damn, thinking was difficult. He’d rest for now, and deal with this later.

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With Reiju, she marched to the lab and ordered all of the people there to destroy anything that indicated any hint of Sanji’s existence. She twisted the truth around; telling the doctors that Sanji had brought shame to the Vinsmoke name and that anything and everything pertaining to his existence needed to be destroyed. That Judge

ordered a nasty death for anyone who dared to speak that name in his presence – and to tell everyone.

Reiju made sure that as far as anyone knew, Vinsmoke Sanji had ceased to exist. He was now free.

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Sitting on an empty rock in the middle of nowhere with an old Pirate Captain wasn't where Sanji and Pudding could have ever pictured themselves. They were starving. There was not much left in the sack of food the children had to share between themselves.

Pudding unfortunately, had inherited her mother's voracious appetite; and having to suppress that part of herself was akin to an agonizingly slow, cruel torture. Pudding figured that she was lucky she hadn't inherited her mother's raving madness when it came to her not getting enough to eat.

"That old bastard has so much food..." Sanji griped. *"There's one of him and two of us..."*

Sanji gripped his knife and slowly stood up. *"We should kill him and eat his food for ourselves."*

"We could eat him too," Pudding suggested without a second thought. *"Mama eats people all the time."*

When the two kids approached Zeff, demanding that he give them his food – his sack of food hadn't shrunk. When Sanji opened the bag, it was nothing but gold and jewels.

"Where's the food?" Sanji shakily asked.

"You two got all of it," was the simple reply.

"But..." Pudding started. When she looked at Zeff, she noticed... *"Your leg...what happened to your leg?"*

Zeff shrugged. *"I was hungry."*

Sanji started crying in horrified realization. *"You ate your leg...?"*

Even Pudding was crying now, burying her face in her hands as her shoulders shook. Mama had never...she had never sacrificed herself like this. Everyone always had to bend over backwards to appease her wrath and hunger; and often, they were eaten themselves.

“Why?!” Sanji demanded. It didn’t make sense!

“Because you two brats are kids, and I’m an old man.” Zeff answered simply. “Now stop crying, otherwise you’ll dehydrate yourselves even faster. Then what’re you gonna do?”

His words just made the two kids bawl even harder. Zeff stared at the two. Didn’t he tell them to *not* cry?

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When Zeff finally established his restaurant, he had these two strange kids attached to his hip. They dove into his lessons enthusiastically, but sometimes, Sanji needed a good whack on the head because he had quite the mouth on him.

With Pudding, since Zeff would never strike a woman no matter her age, her punishments consisted of denying her access to the kitchen; much to her indignation. Any sneaking on her part involved extending her ban from the kitchen, along with taking away some of her favorite foods at meal time.

Zeff had never had time for a serious relationship – or at least, he never had cared for one. So building a family had never been a priority. But these two kids had given him something he never realized he wanted or needed. He knew that he had become something the two also desperately needed.

His lil’ Eggplant and Creampuff – nicknames that irritated the pair endlessly, made him so proud. Zeff wanted the two to go beyond what they had here. He knew why they were holding themselves back, in spite of the grand dreams they spoke of.

The two deserved to live their dreams.

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At the time, sitting on a rock in the middle of the ocean, Zeff told them about the dream he had; a ridiculous thing, he had called it – but aren’t the best dreams the crazy ones?

Sanji and Pudding owed Zeff so much. So they would not let the man’s beloved restaurant go without a fight. This place was Zeff’s dream.

[...]

“Hey, old man.” Luffy said as he finished up the last of his food. “If my crew fight that guy and win, can we have a couple of your cooks?”

Usopp jerked a bit at Luffy’s question. “Wait, I thought we were going to avoid them!”

Luffy was serious. “Things changed.”

“Huh?” the various chefs around the restaurant stared at him in confusion. “Who’s he talking about? What is he talking about?”

“Oh? You want to take some of these troublemakers off my hands?” Zeff looked amused. He had a feeling he knew, but he asked anyway. “Which ones?”

Luffy smirked as he pointed, “Sanji and Pudding.”

“WHAT?!” Sanji shouted.

“You’re really insistent, aren’t you?” Pudding muttered darkly, a tick mark appearing on her head. The edge of her patience had very nearly been reached.

“You can take ‘em.” Zeff replied.

The couple that Luffy was after objected quite loudly to Zeff, who simply glanced at them with a flat look.

“Yahoo!” Luffy and Naruto cheered and high-fived. “We have Cooks!”

“No you don’t!” both Sanji and Pudding protested.

“You might as well just agree, otherwise he’ll never leave you alone.” Zoro advised.

It wasn’t long until they heard the shouts of Krieg’s men, readying themselves for battle.

“Raise the fins, quickly!” Sanji ordered his fellow Chefs. “Otherwise, the fight will be brought *into* the Baratie!”

“Understood!”

Just then, something hit Luffy. There was more shouting outside, but this time...fear and anger hit Luffy like a brick, and the hair on the

back of his neck stood on edge. The predator had found its prey.

“Someone else is out there.” Luffy said, quickly moving to stand outside. His crew was right behind him.

Krieg’s men were in upheaval as they cursed and panicked over who or what they were seeing.

“*MIHAWK!*” Krieg bellowed like a fool. “You dare show your face before me again?!”

Inwardly, Gin cringed; because Krieg acted as if Mihawk had been on the losing end of their last confrontation.

“Mihawk?” Zoro whispered. His hands were shaking in anticipation.

Mihawk was sitting casually on a raft with surrounded by crosses and candles lit with green flame. He stood up and drew the blade from his back – a long, black blade that made Zoro shiver with what he could hear from it. That sword had a powerful spirit, and it showed just how strong Mihawk was simply from his ability to touch it.

The sword *allowed* Mihawk the honor of wielding it.

Naruto was shaking. He only had a vague idea of *Sword Spirit* thanks to what Zoro had showed him; and he was just learning, but Naruto had never felt or heard anything like that black blade before. Its voice made him shiver.

Mihawk swung his sword in a large arc, and everyone watched in shock as Krieg’s ship split in half; cleanly cut across its middle. There was screaming as people either lost their limbs or were bisected before they could even make a sound. Krieg’s men – the ones who could walk rapidly piled onto the Baratie’s fins or on the remains of their vessel and stared at Mihawk in horror.

Even Krieg seemed to realize being quiet was probably the better option here.

The black blade was *singing*.

This isn’t a good idea. Kuina’s voice sounded inside Zoro’s mind. It probably wasn’t, but...

“Screw it, this is my chance!” Zoro stood on the railing. “Dracule Mihawk!”

“Hmm?” Dracule casually turned towards Zoro.

“I, Roronoa Zoro am issuing a challenge to you! Fight me!”

“What? *Now?!*” Nami didn’t like this.

“Yeah, go Zoro-aniki!” both Johnny and Yosaku cheered.

Luffy grimaced a little. In his gut, he knew that Zoro wasn’t going to win.

“Very well,” Mihawk sheathed the black blade. “I’m bored, so I’ll amuse you kid.”

Mihawk swiftly jumped over to one end of Krieg’s former ship.

“Hey, what’re you-?” Usopp started to protest when Zoro jumped off of the railing and *onto* the water.

“How the hell?” Sanji asked. The cigarette had fallen out of his mouth in his shock.

Everyone who had never seen water-walking before gaped – Luffy’s eyes were sparkling.

Zoro tied his bandana around his head as when he was going to be fighting seriously.

“Oh?” Mihawk raised a brow. He had never seen water-walking before; so his reaction was more in curiosity than actual interest. “That’s a new one.”

Zoro drew all three swords, and Mihawk...Mihawk dared to make fun of him by drawing a *knife*.

“I’m no beast that goes all out when hunting a rabbit.” Mihawk commented when Zoro glared and questioned the small dagger. “Unfortunately, I don’t have a smaller weapon than this.”

He’s not taking me seriously. Zoro knew, but of course, why would he? Roronoa Zoro was just a no-name orphaned brat from a small island in East Blue challenging the greatest Swordsman in the world.

“Come at me.” Mihawk said. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Zoro got into position, and charged forward, temporarily fading out and appearing on Mihawk’s right – Mihawk’s eyes widened ever so

slightly – before fading back to Mihawk’s front, just inches away.

“*Sora surasshu gihō!*” Zoro called out, and Mihawk simply took a small step back and twisted to the side ever so slightly.

/ “***This is bad...***”/ Kyuubi voiced. / “***He’s not going to win, that idiot!***” /

Mihawk held up his knife, and – Zoro stared as he carried through. Mihawk had anticipated the fade out and blocked right when he became solid. Mihawk was easily holding back the first blade, and he wasn’t even struggling. The technique was followed by Zoro swinging his remaining two swords in rapid succession in a rapid twisting motion, but Mihawk blocked each one of them easily. Plus, he had thrown Zoro’s aim off ever so slightly with a mere push of his knife. Because he wasn’t in contact with the ground, Zoro couldn’t correct his course to shift back into the right position.

“He *blocked* the attack?!” Naruto was getting scared. He squeezed the banister, cracking it a little.

Gaara bit his lip and fidgeted with his scarf.

“You have silver eyes.” Mihawk observed, his golden ones studying Zoro intently once Zoro had finished with the technique. Zoro paused. Did Mihawk know a Kūhaku? It didn’t matter.

Zoro quickly pulled back, before he charged once again. “*Oni...*” Zoro faded out once more in his charge, appearing behind Mihawk momentarily before appearing on his left. “*...Giri!*”

Energy clashed around them, and sparks flew. Zoro stared at the point where his swords crossed; all three easily held back by that damned dagger once again. He had seen through it...

The exasperated tone was obvious. *Of course he did...why wouldn’t he?*

Zoro started swinging his swords, and the clashing of steel echoed around them. Mihawk wasn’t even trying. “**This is how far apart we are? No! I have to bring everything I can!**”

“*Kai!*” He released Seals that were suppressing his strength and speed.

Mihawk quickly adapted to the change in speed, and he felt the sudden increase in strength that proved that this kid had initially been holding back.

As Mihawk charged forward, he thrust the blade outward; and Zoro faded out a foot away from where he had been standing, dodging the attack in less than a second. Zoro quickly swung one of his swords upwards, and Mihawk stepped back. He looked down and raised a brow.

Everyone gasped when they saw that a corner of his coat collar had been cut. Mihawk wasn't injured; there wasn't even a cut on the shirt he was wearing. But on his jacket. Excitement started to stir within Mihawk. That kid...

Mihawk suddenly charged forward, slashing with his knife just a bit faster – proving he had been just casually moving earlier. Zoro's blades groaned under the strain, and he quickly pulled back again and he stared in shock as one of his blades shattered upon impact with that damned knife. Zoro briefly stared at the sword handle, and all the broken pieces that fell.

Just *one* injury, dammit! Just a scratch that drew blood; *not* simply tearing his clothing! That's all he wanted at this point. Zoro swiftly sheathed the now useless sword, mentally thanking it for serving him and would give it a proper farewell later. Grabbing Kuina's sword from his mouth with a now free hand, he focused on his chakra this time.

“Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu!”

Zoro focused the wind of his attack, sending all of it towards Mihawk. The people standing on the Baratie felt the wind whipping through the air; but none of the wind blades behind the attack came close to hitting them or shot in their direction. Wind blades tore through the remains of the ship and caused high waves to soak most of the people watching and rain down on the two combatants.

“What is this?” Sanji gaped. This Mihawk guy was way out of Zoro's league, but Zoro was insanely strong as well.

“I've never seen anything like this...” Pudding said, her eyes sparkling with fascination. She had siblings who were swordsmen, but none of them had ever done anything like what she was seeing. “It's amazing...”

Mihawk didn't really bother to move; instead, he was rapidly slicing through the chakra-wind blades. There seemed to be more to his defensive tactics, but Zoro wasn't sure what they were.

“He was using Busoshoku Haki there.” Luffy commented from where he stood, completely serious. “But that wasn’t the advanced version.”

“Busoshoku Haki?” Gaara asked, cocking his head.

“That Mihawk guy covered his knife with it.” Luffy said, not really explaining as he was focused more on the fight.

“It’s rare for someone from East Blue to know about Haki already.” Zeff noted Luffy’s knowledge.

“I was taught.” Luffy shrugged as he stated the obvious, before turning his attention back to the fight. Zoro moved almost like Touma did – but it wasn’t as smooth.

“That was new as well.” Mihawk said. As that old thrill stirred within him even stronger still. “Now, you’ve really got my attention, Roronoa Zoro.”

“Akuma no Kanashi sakebi-waza!”

The singing of metal blades became grating to all those who heard it. They covered their ears at the sound, but Mihawk...Mihawk was smiling, and his eyes were more alive than when they had been upon his arrival. Mihawk was twisting his dagger around. This kid with silver eyes and techniques that he hadn’t seen before... finally, someone interesting had shown themselves.

“What ferocity your swordsmanship has...” Mihawk said thoughtfully. The kid had been trained well, that was for sure. But aspects of it were unrefined; the kid was relying a lot on brute strength and speed, while that fading technique seemed to be somewhat subconscious. The kid wasn’t fully utilizing that technique.

Such a shame – but there was promise there.

He would fade out at random intervals, but always, always came from the front or the sides. Even if Zoro appeared behind him and could have tried for an opening, he never did. Zoro was coming at him like a wild beast; an animal with sharp claws and fangs lashing out at anyone who got too close.

Their blades clashed once again as Zoro practically slammed into Mihawk – or more accurately, Mihawk’s dagger – and more sparks flew. Zoro’s second sword snapped just seconds after they collided. He quickly jumped back and sheathed that sword as well.

He refused for it to end like this.

Zoro remembered just a week or two ago; a crazy guy grinning at him in the middle of the chaos at a Marine Base who thought that it was the perfect time to ask him to join him.

"The Greatest Swordsman in the World, huh? If you can't accomplish something that small, you've got no right to call yourself the future Pirate King's nakama."

Zoro got into position to execute another attack, when – Mihawk was upon him and Zoro instinctively faded out to dodge, except, the dagger tore through a portion of his chest and shoulder as he moved, and Zoro felt the energy behind the attack ripple through him and out behind him. Zoro froze, with the dagger still in his shoulder. If he moved, he would make his wounds even worse. Not like that ever stopped him before.

"You should step back." Mihawk advised.

"Sorry. I can't do that..." Zoro said with a smirk. He tasted copper. That probably wasn't good.

"Hmm." Mihawk pulled the dagger out and sheathed it. "You're truly an interesting one, Roronoa Zoro. I haven't met one like you in long time." Mihawk reached for his black sword. "As a Swordsman's courtesy, I'll sink you with the world's strongest Black Blade."

Zoro could hear the sword singing with excitement. Since it wasn't in his hands, he couldn't really tell if it was excited for the fight or for bloodshed. Hell, maybe it was both.

*"*I don't know if I'll ever become the greatest Swordsman, but I'm willing to die trying*"*

Mihawk shot forward, and swung his blade down in a wide arch. Everyone watched in horror as Zoro was bisected – and exploded into water.

"WHHHHHHAAAAAAATTTTT??!!!" nearly the entire audience shouted.

"He melted?!"

Mihawk watched, absolutely fascinating. Zoro shot out of the ocean several feet away from Mihawk's left; with his sword sheathed,

“Akuma no...” chakra covered his blade, and Mihawk ran forward; cracks spider-webbed across the deck from the force of his charge. “Gin no Tsuki no Dageki-waza!”

Zoro swiftly unsheathed Wado Ichimonji, and a silver, crescent shape flowed off of his blade as he swung it outwards. Mihawk cut the attack in half. While one half veered off to the side and cut through the water for several miles; one half of it sheered through the ship, along with one side of Mihawk’s hat and the feather adorning it – his hat fell to the deck, along with several hairs. Their swords clashed again, and Zoro’s arms shook under the strain. He couldn’t give in!

Another strike, and Zoro felt the blade cut through him. ‘*I lost...*’

"Promise me! One day, either you or me will be the greatest swordsman in the world!"

Heh... looks like he wasn’t able to keep that promise. It was a harsh truth.

Yet another strike as Mihawk shot passed him, and Zoro was on his knee. His vision was blurry. So this was the power of the strongest. He had so far to go. It seemed impossible. He could faintly hear his brothers yelling at him to move. Zoro slowly stood and sheathed Wado Ichimonji, and turned to face Mihawk.

He simply spread out his arms, and waited for the final strike.

“What are you...?”

“Don’t you know?” Zoro smirked. “Scars on the back are a Swordsman’s shame!”

Mihawk gave a small smile. So that was why the kid kept attacking from the front and the sides. He genuinely smiled as he commented, “How admirable!”

The Black Blade was brought down, and Zoro went flying backwards and into the sea as blood burst from his chest.

“ZORO!” Gaara was suddenly charging across the water with sand whipping around him. He was going to rip off that bastard’s head! Mihawk stared at the redhead, a feeling of furious, oppressive dread that was massive in its intensity hit him. One could say that it felt *almost* like that of Haoshoku Haki, but it was different.

Where Haoshoku housed within it a command consisting of silent words and powerful, oppressive emotions; this felt like a manifestation of a death threat – like some invisible force was trying to squeeze its hands around his throat to squeeze every bit of life out of him. If he hadn't been the man he was, Mihawk would have had a hard time keeping clear-headed and his breath stable.

He could see the Pirates and the Chefs reacting; they weren't fainting, but they were too terrified to move.

Mihawk was ready to cut that boy down; child or not. He prepared his sword to do just that.

"Gaara, back off, *now!*" Luffy ordered in an uncharacteristic no-nonsense tone. He also had a tight grip on Naruto's shoulder, who looked ready to charge at the infamous Swordsman as well. The energies of the invisible people felt strange and chaotic. Almost unbalanced. It somehow felt wrong, but Luffy didn't know enough about them to even question it.

"I'm gonna kill him!" Gaara snarled as he glared at Luffy for daring to tell him not to avenge his brother.

Luffy's tone held no room for argument. "That's an order. Stand down."

\ ***"Back down now, kiddo. That man is fuckin' dangerous!"*** \ Ichibi shouted, forcing his chakra back, unwilling to let this continue. \ ***"I'm not gonna let you fuckin' get yourself killed just 'cause you're throwin' a hissy fit over Roronoa losin'! Did you not see what that guy did?! Impenetrable shield or not, you do not stand a chance!"*** \

Gaara took a deep, calming breath. Irritated at Ichibi for pulling mentally against him.

"Zoro's still alive." Luffy assured. His energy felt weak but it was still strong.

Gaara stood on the water, looking torn as he slowly calmed down. Hopefully, Luffy wasn't too angry with him.

Gaara glanced down guiltily, mentally apologizing to Ichibi. "Sorry, Captain..."

Luffy just shook his head, not angry in the slightest. He could understand where Gaara was coming from.

Over with Johnny and Yosaku, they were pulling Zoro into a boat, and they took in the sight of his injuries.

“He’s breathing, he’s gonna be okay!” Yosaku called out, mostly for himself. These injuries were... *really* bad.

“Zoro-nii!” Gaara ran over to help, while Naruto was also at his side as quickly as he could get there.

“It’s still far too early for you to die, Roronoa!” Mihawk called out. “My name is Dracule Mihawk! You’re strong, but there’s still so much for you to learn! No matter how many years it takes, I will wait for you at the top! On the day you are ready, seek me out, Roronoa Zoro!”

“Well, how about that?” Zeff looked amused. “That kid just got himself acknowledged by *Hawk-Eye* Mihawk.”

“Hey, you shouldn’t be moving!” Johnny said to Zoro, who gripped Wado Ichimonji like a lifeline. Zoro did try to sit up, but Naruto encouraged him to stay laying down. His injuries hadn’t been this bad before.

When he couldn’t move, Zoro instead raised his sword skyward. “Luffy...can you hear me?”

“Yeah!”

“I’m sorry for disappointing you... I know you need nothing but the best...” Zoro’s voice cracked, whether it was from his pain or his emotions, he wasn’t sure anymore. “You expected more from me... and I’ve let you down. Please, forgive me!” Zoro coughed, and continued. He *had* to do this. It was no longer simply about carrying his promise to Kuina. It was about a guy who had faith in him long before knowing what he was capable of and believing that he could do what he had set his mind to. “I solemnly swear on this sword, until the day comes that I defeat him and take his title, that I will never, *never* lose again!”

Neither Naruto nor Gaara had ever seen Zoro cry before, and they were getting teary-eyed themselves. Luffy smiled proudly at the feeling of Zoro’s conviction. It was *so much* stronger this time around.

“Is that okay with you, Pirate King?!”

Luffy beamed. “Right!”

Zoro's arm nearly dropped, but he paused when warmth closed around his hand, and he saw Kuina sitting there, a warm and proud smile on her face as she held his hand in her own. *Congratulations, Zoro-kun. You have finally begun to climb your mountain.*

Zoro blinked and she was gone. But the warmth was still there. Zoro covered his face with his other hand, and his tears were now for an entirely different reason.

"Pirate King?" Mihawk raised an amused eyebrow as he turned his attention on Luffy. Mihawk had to give a short laugh, but it was clear he wasn't laughing at Luffy or his aim. "That's a goal far loftier than your friend's. What's your name, kid?"

"Monkey D. Luffy."

"I look forward to watching your progress, Monkey D. Luffy." Mihawk was sitting on his raft once again, and he smirked at Luffy. What an interesting crew. "See you on the Grand Line someday."

The wind whipped around them, and the man was gone.

"Huh, he ran away." Krieg said pompously.

"That's not what he did! Are you an idiot?" Luffy questioned, causing Krieg to balk and splutter at him with indignation. Luffy ignored him and called out, "Johnny, Yosaku! Get Zoro somewhere safe!"

"Right!" the two men quickly moved away from the battlefield.

Nami looked on in disbelief and horror. She was shaking. She didn't belong here, standing next to them. **I have to leave...**

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Once the shock of seeing Mihawk had worn off, the Krieg Pirates were itching to fight. The Chefs fought with various kitchen knives, and they were certainly skilled. But the Pirates used equally underhanded tactics like their Captain, and all too soon they had the advantage.

Sanji muttered under his breath about these guys letting their skills go to waste. He offered a hand to Pudding, "Shall we dance, Pudding-chan?"

Pudding giggled. "It would be an honor, Sanji-dear."

Zeff rolled his eyes. Did those two really have to do that *now*?

The two of them joined the fray.

Sanji began a rapid series of kicks as he spun on his hands, while Pudding started darting through the various Pirates with carving knives. While she did avoid arteries, she made sure to go after the nerves in their limbs, making holding onto a weapon or even fighting effectively extremely difficult.

One man, much larger than the others, wasn't really phased when Pudding slashed him. Due to all of his fat and muscle, that hadn't atrophied much simply because of how much he had. He was quick to reach out and grab Pudding's arm, practically yanking her off her feet. She was lucky that her arm didn't come out of its socket.

He leaned in closed and laughed, letting his foul-smelling breath tickle her ear. "That really hurt."

Pudding slowly turned her head and glared. Especially at the bulbous nose at the center of his ugly face. There were many things that she had inherited from her mother: aspects of her temperament, her voracious appetite and love for food, but also...

Pudding opened her mouth wide and clamped down on her captor's nose. He of course screamed and shoved her away, leaving his nose with her. Pudding spat out the appendage, and spat again, wiping blood from her chin. "You taste disgusting."

"It burns! It's burning!" the man screamed as various portions of his face started to melt away. His crewmembers could only look on in horror as their friend screamed. Acidic saliva wasn't pleasant for those on the receiving end. The man passed out due to the pain, and he crashed to the deck.

Another charged at her, determined to avenge his fallen comrades. He was a fairly skilled Swordsman, and he had managed to knock one of the knives out of her hand. Pudding fluidly dodged to the side as he thrust the blade at her and she drew in close. Smirking, Pudding looped her arm around him until their faces were several inches apart. Of course, he tried to pull away, obviously remembering what happened to the other guy who got too close.

There was the sound of a gunshot, and the man fell to the deck. Pudding held a smoking pistol, and she quickly collected her knife.

Sanji was busy fighting a guy called Pearl, and he was one of the more odd and eccentric ones. Either Krieg had managed to find some

oversized oysters or they had made Pearl's armor for his namesake.

"Let's see how strong it really is," Sanji said, tapping his toe on the deck. Sanji charged forward, and kicked out at Pearle, who raised an arm to block.

"Collier Shoot!"

Pearle's confident smirk didn't last as his armor dented, nearly crushing his forearm. Sanji wasn't going to let Pearle have a chance to retaliate. *"Epaule! Cotelette! Selle! Poitrine! Gigot! Mouton Shot!"*

"That was probably overkill," Sanji admitted, his legs tingling just a bit from the several impacts he had just delivered in succession. Busoshoku Haki was damn useful in situations like this. "But I'm not willing to hand over this shitty restaurant without a fight."

Pearl went flying with one last kick, and he landed several feet away on one of the remaining halves of his former ship in front of Gaara. Pearl was shaking, mostly in anger. His mind couldn't seem to process that someone had gotten passed his defense, and hell, even his armor got dented! He started to scream, as his sanity started to slip. "You think *you* can beat *me*?! My defense is *everything*!"

A smile spread across Gaara's face. "I like your armor. Is your defense really as strong as you claim?"

Pearl didn't like how that kid was looking at him; for some reason that made him nervous. He was quickly on his feet, ready to face the boy. "You can't touch me!"

"I think I could rip you to shreds if I wanted to."

Pearl reared back a fist, and smirked, trying to mask his fear. "I'll make you regret ever thinking you could beat me! *Pearl Present!*"

Sanji started making his way over, not wanting a kid to be subject to these shitty bastards' antics. "Kid!"

His eyes widened when sand surrounded Gaara before the hit could even land, and the sand grabbed Pearl's arm. The sand continued enveloping Pearl, who started screaming as he tried to pull away. Blood spurted from the sand and Pearl screamed even more.

"MY BLOOD! I'M BLEEDING!! THAT'S MY BLOOD!!"

“Dammit, okay...this kid is insane!” Sanji griped. “What’s *with* this crew?!”

“*Fire Pearl Daitokuten!*” Pearl set himself on fire with blue flames, and was trying to throw them at Gaara, whose own shield simply rose up to protect him. Portions of Gaara’s sand began to heat up; turning into tiny bits of glass. Gaara simply started manipulating his sand to form hands, and with a bit of exertion because the armor was heavy; Gaara ripped the leather on the shoulder portion in half. Gripping the armor as he pulled it over to himself, Gaara grinned victoriously.

“This is mine now. I’ll let you keep your limbs for giving this to me. So that’s why I only broke your arm.”

Pearl, along with the rest of the Krieg Pirates gaped.

“My...armor...” Pearl was shaking again, enraged. “Are you kidding me--!”

He was cut off when Sanji kicked him – stomach, ribs, and neck, finally followed by flip where Sanji hooked his foot behind Pearl and smashed his face into the deck. Pearl was down for the count.

“This is mine, you can’t have it.” Gaara claimed the armor, as he stared unblinkingly at Sanji.

“I don’t want any shitty armor, kid.”

Sand suddenly wrapped around Sanji as bullets rained down on him. Sanji stiffened slightly at the close call, and thoughtfully eyed the wall of sand. He certainly wouldn’t complain about not getting turned into Swiss cheese. He hadn’t been paying attention, dammit! Because he seriously didn’t think someone would try and shoot him from all the over where a guy with a large Gatling gun was standing.

The man jerked back a little from the glare Gaara was sending his way.

There was a nearby crash, and Zeff fell onto the deck with Gin sitting on his back. Twin tonfas were pressed against his face and back.

“Chef Zeff!” one of the cooks called worriedly.

“Oh, worried about me?” Zeff asked, seeming far too calm considering the situation he was in. “This is nothing.”

“Shut up!” Gin demanded.

“What’re you doing, Gin?” Sanji asked, taking a drag from his cigarette.

“I’m sorry, Sanji...” Gin said. “But if Krieg has ordered me to attack all of you, than that is what I have to do.”

“I’d get as far away from him right now, if I were you.” Sanji calmly recommended. “It’s for your well-being.”

More shots were fired, and once again, sand surrounded Sanji.

“I’m getting tired of him.” Gaara said irritably, looking at the gunman.

“Hey kid, can you get me over there?” Sanji asked.

Sand wrapped around him and Gaara charged forward with a roar, causing the opposing Pirates to flinch back. More sand whirled around as it grabbed the gun and yanked the man holding it off of his feet and into the ocean several miles away. Gaara already had the shield; besides, Zeff came first.

Gin was so focused on the insanity that Gaara was displaying that he failed to notice when Zeff suddenly twisted around, shoving Gin off. A foot connected with Gin’s gut and he went flying into the wall. The wind had been knocked out of him and his lungs burned and he gagged. Even with his wooden leg broken, Zeff easily stood tall on his remaining leg.

Gin finally was able to get some air into his lungs, and he took in grateful gasping breaths. That kick hadn’t felt normal.

“You really think taking me on would be easy?” Zeff asked. “You Krieg Pirates should have learned by now not to underestimate people. Especially a humble Chef like myself.”

Sanji was then next to Zeff. “I’ll fight him, shitty-geezer.”

“Just because I’m retired doesn’t mean I can’t handle myself, lil’ Eggplant.”

Gin shakily stood up. “I may lose, but I have to fight for Don Krieg...”

“I don’t understand, shit-pit.” Gaara said, stopping Gin’s attack long before he could execute it. “Why are you so loyal to Krieg?”

“It’s not something you could understand, kid. Don Krieg took us in when we had no place to go.”

“I understand.” Gaara replied. “But what I don’t understand is willingly sacrificing yourself for someone who doesn’t care whether you die or not.” Gaara cocked his head. “What good is his dream if you aren’t there to experience it with him? Doesn’t Krieg want you there to share his dream?”

Dammit...Gin was shaking. Too many doubts were there. They had succeeded all this time, and for what... Don Krieg was a leader who killed those who disrespected him – they had deserved it, *hadn’t* they...? They had declared their loyalty to Krieg because they had believed in his strength and leadership, but yet...

First Naruto and now this kid. Gin cursed again. He didn’t like what he heard, because those were the doubts in the back of his mind that he had glossed over with excuses and the lies he had convinced himself to believe. Hearing not one but *two* people – and *children* at that – demanded answers and asked simple questions that brought those doubts to the forefront of his mind...

Gin couldn’t help but think that the only reason he had been kept alive all this time was because of his usefulness and he had never been insubordinate – for fear of what would happen to him. Thinking those who were killed deserved it somehow, because if only they had just listened to Krieg, then they would still be alive.

“I...” Gin started hesitantly.

Just then, there was screaming – all from his crew – begging Krieg not use his weapon. Gin paled when he saw that Krieg was about to use *MH-5*.

The cold, hard reality hit Gin. His men meant nothing to him. Krieg could kill all of them here and just go elsewhere to gather more crewmembers. They were easily replaceable.

Gin had his gasmask, but a part of him didn’t want to put it on. All of this, his years of loyalty had been for *nothing*. He felt so lost.

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Meanwhile, Luffy wasn’t willing to sit and twiddle his thumbs waiting for the others to finish their fights. He wasn’t even satisfied with just sitting around and watching. As soon as he knew that Zoro was safe,

Luffy rocketed towards Krieg; using parts of the broken ship.

Krieg saw his charge and fired numerous bullets with a mini-version of a Gatling gun hidden in his shield.

“Fool! The easiest person to kill is one who’s in a frenzy!” Krieg shouted as he threw bombs at the charging boy. “This will be your graveyard!”

Luffy easily dodged the onslaught of bullets, though a few did graze his skin; and those bombs? Seriously, giving the other guy cover wasn’t the best of ideas. Yup, Krieg was a dumbass confirmed. Still hidden thanks to the waves and mist the bombs’ impact had created, Luffy ducked low and dove forward much like a frog. He then sprung upwards on his hands, head-butting Krieg in the chin.

Krieg of course, was so shocked by this action he didn’t have a chance to react as Luffy flipped over him and grabbed his cape in tight fists.

“*Gomu-Gomu no...*” Luffy smirked as he swung Krieg through the air twisting his arms, Krieg’s crew all openly gaped at the display as he slammed the man down on the wreckage of their ship, “*Corkscrew!*”

Krieg shot up, infuriated; bruised and bleeding. “You little...” Krieg produced a large spear, and began swinging it. “I’ll kill you!”

Luffy charged forward, and easily landed on the spear and began running towards Krieg with his fist reared back several feet. “*Gomu-Gomu no...*”

When Krieg deemed Luffy was too close, he whirled his cape around himself to reveal the nasty spikes – which he had dubbed his “porcupine cape”.

“Let’s see get through th--!” Krieg started to taunt, but was cut off. The man’s confident smirk changed into one of shock when Luffy’s fist punched his jaw; not caring about the spikes in the least. “*Pistol!*”

Luffy shook his hand a little, sending out drops of blood. Those spike stung a bit.

Krieg spun around and landed on the broken deck. His men and the cooks all stared in shock. Luffy’s foot shot high in the air as he flipped, timing it perfectly, “*Gomu-Gomu no...Ono!*”

Luffy’s foot was brought down in a brutal axe-kick. A nasty cracking

sound could be heard while Krieg gasped for air.

“This *will* not be my graveyard!” Luffy declared.

Shakily, Krieg got to his feet. The only reason his injuries weren’t more serious was thanks to his armor. Krieg couldn’t believe this. *This* kid was beating him! NO! Krieg refused to admit defeat here. He wouldn’t accept this! He would *not* go down! “*MH-5.*”

In spite of his crews’ pleas, Krieg smirked as he donned a gasmask and fired. The bomb flew high into the air, and Krieg began to laugh. “There’s no way *any* of you can stop this! This is a deadly poison that can kill any living thing within five miles! In less than a minute...”

Krieg’s confidence faltered and his smile fell into one of astonishment as a redheaded kid surrounded by sand shot into the air and a wave of sand enveloped the bomb. The muffled **boom** could be heard, and purple fumes rose from Gaara’s sand for a few minutes before he trapped it in his corked gourd.

Gaara landed on the water, and smiled eerily at Krieg. “That was noth...”

Gaara trailed off as he started to faint, but Naruto was there before Gaara could sink underwater. While checking on Gaara, Naruto felt even himself swaying.

“Gaara?!”

/ “*He’s fine,*”/ Kyuubi assured. / “*Those two will simply have to recover by sleeping it off. My little brother won’t let anything happen to his vessel.*”/

Relieved, Naruto was quick to get his brother to safety on Merry. Zoro was passed out on the bed, and Naruto figured that Gaara being near Zoro would do more harm than good. So he placed Gaara on a cot by the wall.

Naruto lingered at the doorway, looking back at his brothers. He couldn’t help but worry. Somewhere, he had read a story about a Spirit that lived on ships, or something. Was there a Spirit on Merry, too? Putting a hand on the doorframe, he requested of the ship quietly, “Keep ‘em safe, will you?”

Then, Naruto was off.

Back with Krieg and Luffy, the latter started laughing. “You sure like to talk big, huh?”

“You...” Krieg looked absolutely infuriated. “You will not steal my victory! I will take your life! I’ll kill that old man! I will have that shi--!”

“...*Bazooka!*”

He had been so busy talking; Krieg had failed to notice that Luffy was preparing to attack. He was knocked back several feet, and the armor on his chest and stomach dented and shattered. Krieg crashed into a portion of his former ship and flipped over several times and into the ocean.

Luffy sniffed in a mildly annoyed tone. “You also talk too much.”

“Don Krieg!” Several of his men quickly swam over to rescue him.

“You’ve lost!” Luffy called out. “Surrender now!”

The men looked ready to continue fighting, but it was Gin who stepped up and called out, “We’re not fighting anymore, got it?!”

The men supported a knocked-out Krieg, and they pulled themselves onto the wreckage.

“What are we going to do now?”

“We do have a spare ship you can use.” Zeff offered.

Gin merely nodded, and watched as all the men loaded onto the far too small vessel.

One of the men reached out to help Gin onto the boat, but Gin shook his head. “Sorry, but I’m not coming with you this time.”

“*WHAT?!!*” numerous voices shouted.

“Don Krieg probably should be awake for this, but...” Gin sighed, maybe it was better that he wasn’t. “I’m defecting from the crew. My reasons are...” very complicated. “I’m not willing to serve a man who disregards his men so easily, and who is not willing to keep a truce for the sake of others.”

There were hesitant expressions on the others' faces, while others looked angry, likely viewing this as betrayal.

"We aren't strong enough for the Grand Line," Gin continued. "If you want to go, go ahead, but you should only do so once you're stronger. I don't want to see anyone else die like we did today."

Various men then pulled themselves from the pile, and back onto the fins of the Baratie.

"If you're leaving, then I'm coming with you!"

"I'd serve under you any day!"

"I'm loyal to Don Krieg, of course...but if it came to following anyone into battle, it'd be you."

"I'll watch your back, Captain!"

"You guys..." Gin started looking emotional, but then he sighed in defeat. "Alright, fine."

He scratched the back of his head as he looked at Zeff. "It seems we'll need another boat."

Gin and his men settled into the boat. He glanced up at Luffy, and saw that Naruto was standing close to his side.

"You have a good crew, Luffy."

"Yeah, they're the best." Luffy agreed, causing Naruto and Usopp to chuckle at his praise.

"I suppose I'll see you on the Grand Line someday...we'll be there once we're strong enough to survive."

"See ya, Gin, 'ttebayou!"

Gin waved to the kid before one of his men grabbed the oars and began rowing away. The cooks and Pirates watched as two different boats set off, in different directions. One was ridiculously full; while the other only held five.

"Ah, Gin's a good guy." Luffy nodded approvingly. "He'll make a great Captain." Luffy then turned to Sanji and Pudding with a grin that matched the sun. "Well, I kicked his ass. Looks like you guys are officially part of my crew!"

“Absolutely not!” Pudding crossed her arm in an ‘X’ shape. “We didn’t agree to this!”

“Yeah, the shitty geezer doesn’t speak for us like that!” Sanji then rounded on Zeff. “Why are you trying to get rid of us?! Don’t we--” Sanji stopped himself from saying anything else, worried about what he might say that would potentially reveal something far too personal.

Zeff heaved a tired sigh, and leaned against the wall. “I’m not trying to get rid of either of you. You are such a thick-headed individual, lil’ Eggplant. You too, Creampuff.”

Both of them paused, and looked at Zeff.

“Then why...?” Pudding asked softly.

“Because there’s nothing else I can teach you.” Zeff replied. “You two are naturals and still have so much more room to grow. I want you to carry on your dreams instead of wasting your time here, and well,” he looked at Sanji, “one of us has to find All Blue, and it certainly isn’t going to be me. I have a restaurant to run.”

“Well...” Pudding blushed, looking teary-eyed. “I-I...don’t...” she looked at Luffy, then narrowed her eyes at him. “Are you sure you want me by your side, Luffy-san?”

“Yep. I do.”

Pudding then pushed back her bangs, revealing her third eye. “I can be a bit of a monster when I don’t get my way. I will gladly bring great calamity upon those who make me angry.”

Luffy, Usopp, and Naruto all blinked a few times before they were suddenly in her personal space, peering at her eye.

“So cool~!” Luffy whispered mesmerized.

“Wow. That seems so useful...” Usopp put a hand on his chin, considering all the uses.

“Can you actually see out of it?” Naruto asked, smiling at her.

Pudding blushed as she turned away, hands on her cheeks. “I wouldn’t mind being surrounded by men like this.”

Sanji was looking at the three with an air of approval. He looked at Pudding when she took his hand in hers. “Let’s go with them, Sanji-

dear. My recipes have been becoming stagnant, I think, and I want new inspiration.”

“...Fine.” Sanji said, somewhat reluctantly. He silently hoped those broken dishes wouldn’t come back to haunt him.

“Luffy-aniki!” Yosaku ran up to them. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but Merry is gone! And so is Nami-aneki!”

“What?!”

“I don’t know what happened, we were making sure that no-one was coming near your ship when she approached us... she knocked both of us out.”

“Nami’s gone...?” Luffy asked, immediately concerned. “Where?”

“We don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Gaara and Zoro are with her, so...it’ll be fine?” Usopp said hesitantly.

“Yeah, she’ll totally be fine, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto said, looking very unconvinced about his words. Knowing Gaara, he’s going to be furious about being split from them...

Uncomfortable, nervous emotions wafted off of Naruto and Yosaku, while the invisible person with Naruto seemed to be amused.

“She left this note in my pocket, though...” Yosaku handed Luffy a piece of paper.

‘Borrowing Merry for a bit. Will return later.’

Luffy ran out onto the deck and began focusing his Haki; desperately reaching out for the three – well, *four* people on his crew. Nami was out there; feelings of sadness and regret were there. Zoro, Gaara, and that invisible person felt faint, but there was still that promising pulse of life.

“We should go.” Luffy said to his crew. “We’ll wait for you two to get whatever you need, and then we’ll set off.”

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Pudding and Sanji quickly made their way out to the Bounty Hunters’ ship, and the other chefs were waving and calling out tearful goodbyes and well-wishes.

“Sanji, Pudding!” Zeff didn’t exactly shout, but he was loud enough to be heard.

The two turned to him. “Take care of each other...don’t catch cold, alright?”

“CHEF ZEFF!” Sanji called out tearfully, getting to his knees and bowing with his forehead on the floor, with Pudding right next to him. “Thank you for everything!”

“I swear I will take everything you have taught me and carry it out with upmost love and pride!” Pudding said, tears rolling down her face.

The chefs all cheered, and Luffy smiled as feelings of love and pride came from Zeff.

“Hurry up and go, you two.” Zeff said with a gentle smile.

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Sanji helped Pudding onto Johnny and Yosaku’s ship, and the moment both her feet hit the deck, Sanji delicately kissed her hand. He then took Pudding’s suitcase in his hand, not minding in the least to carry it for her.

“Are you two in a relationship?” Johnny asked, smirking at Sanji and wiggling his eyebrows knowingly. “Lucky bastard.”

“Ah, no, we aren’t.” Sanji said.

At the same time, Pudding blushed and giggled, “Yes, we are.”

Both of them stopped and slowly looked at each other.

“Sanji-dear...” Pudding looked almost teary-eyed once again. “You don’t...”

“Is...is that how you see me, Pudding-chan?” Sanji asked, taking both of her hands in his as he dropped their luggage to the deck with a **thump**.

“Ever since you laid your eyes on mine.” Pudding said softly.

“Then...I accept your feelings full-heartedly.” Sanji said, pulling Pudding into a hug and he pressed a kiss to her head. “To celebrate this momentous occasion, I shall prepare a feast just for you.” Sanji

glared at the men, “You bastards be thankful I’ll prepare something for you too so that you don’t have to eat Pudding-chan’s scraps.”

“I would enjoy every bite even more if...” Pudding cupped Sanji’s cheek and stared deeply into his eyes...before she turned and winked at Usopp, “...you fed me every bite, Usopp-kun.”

Everyone stared and Usopp stuttered. Naruto made a face at the display of...whatever *that* was. Both Sanji and Pudding laughed at the expressions on everyone’s faces.

“They’re gasping like fish; how cute!” Pudding said pulling away from Sanji, as she clasped her hands. “I’m so glad to be on a ship with so many handsome men, but...” she smiled lovingly at Sanji, “You’re my handsome prince, Sanji-dear, and no-one could ever replace you.”

“Of course I am!” Sanji proudly said, getting all fired up as he grinned foolishly at Pudding with hearts in his eyes. “I’ll remain by your side always!” Sanji then sighed wistfully, “I’m looking forward to feeding Nami-swan...”

Sanji picked up the luggage, and the two made their way to the kitchen to make food; their ridiculous commentary disappearing with them. This left everyone out on the deck to stare at their retreating backs.

“The fuck?” Johnny said, which pretty much summed up what most everyone was thinking.

“Ah, I wonder what we’ll get to eat~” Luffy said with a happy sigh. For now, his crew came first. Focusing once again, he directed Yosaku on where to go.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this...” the man said, clearly feeling uneasy the further they sailed. “Arlong Park is in this direction.”

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Nami realized that she didn’t belong here; standing next to Luffy and the others.

“Are you doubting my crew? I didn’t leave my home island for nothing! None of us did! Nothing in this world is worth having if you aren’t willing to risk your life!”

She couldn’t ever leave her home island. Not just yet, anyway.

“Then we’ll die as fools who fought for their dreams.”

Nami ducked her head and fought back tears. “Luffy, you really are an idiot. You had too much faith in me...”

She thought of Luffy’s words: *“I don’t know if I’ll become Pirate King, but I’m willing to die trying.”*

She thought of Zoro, standing there across from Mihawk with no chance of winning; but unwilling to back down simply because he *couldn’t*. It wasn’t about selfishness, as she had assumed. As he laid there, bleeding and in pain, declaring out to Luffy that he would never lose again... Mihawk of all people had acknowledged him.

This wasn’t what she signed up for.

While the fighting had been going on, Nami had quickly made her way through the restaurant, intending on taking Merry back home. The others could find it later – or maybe they could just get another ship – Nami felt a stab of guilt but shoved it down.

She heard the panicked commotion outside, and hit the floor with her hands over her head when there was a loud **BOOM!** that sounded just like a canon firing. It rattled the restaurant.

She didn’t want to be here for impact, it was too bad for everyone else...a guilty feeling niggled its way into her gut. There was more commotion outside, even though the bomb or whatever hadn’t exploded. The Chefs and Pirates were at each other again, and it was easy for Nami to simply sneak towards Merry without drawing any attention to herself.

She made her way out to where their ships were docked, and upon seeing her, both Yosaku and Johnny quickly stood up. “Nami-aneke, are you alright?”

Instead of answering, Nami took out her staff and knocked both men on the head, and they fell to the deck. Hastily writing a note, she shoved it into one of the men’s pockets, and boarded Merry.

Unfortunately for Nami, she failed to realize that she wasn’t Merry’s only passenger...

Several miles away by now, Nami could see Cocoyashi on the horizon; the houses looking like dots. *That* tower loomed over them, even from this distance.

A part of her wondered how the others were doing. They had most certainly won, no doubt about that. They'd probably be angry. But their deal had only been temporary. They all knew that; along with the fact that she was an opportunist.

She was kind enough to at least leave a note behind. It wasn't like she intended to keep Merry.

"Well, it was no longer necessary for me to be there, they don't need me." Nami reasoned with herself. "With the bounty money we got, I have *more* than enough... everything will be fine..."

She wanted to believe that so desperately. Nami shook her head, focusing on anything else. Nami decided now was the time to change her shirt; if only to have an excuse to not think about those she had left behind.

She could finally buy back her village.

She would finally be free. *All* of them would be free.

Nami pulled off her shirt, revealing her Arlong tattoo. Slowly, she put a hand on it. Very soon, she'd be able to remove that cursed mark. Nami turned towards the cabin to get another shirt, when –

"What's going on?" a tired voice sounded from behind Nami, causing her to shriek and jump into a full 180 degree turn to face the other person who *was not supposed to be there*.

Both of them froze.

Nami; because what the heck was Gaara doing *here?! Gaara*; because Nami was standing out on deck and after a cursory glance around the ship, there wasn't anyone else here.

Nami was frozen to the spot by a terrifying sea-green glare that she swore flashed yellow and black for a brief second. A wave of sand surrounded both her and Gaara. That furious, unblinking gaze was set upon her; along with a suffocating force that made her too terrified to even move much less breathe. "Where are the others?!"

Oh, *shit*.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: The Arlong Arc

:An Author's Rambles:

How was the fight with Zoro and Mihawk? I mean, obviously Zoro's skills have been stepped up quite a bit. But he's not quite there. Mihawk is definitely interested in seeing where this kid can go with his skills.

Zeff honestly... In this canon of events, Zeff knows Haki, taught it to both Sanji and Pudding, and well, claiming that a peg leg forced you into early retirement is a nice excuse to get people to leave you alone or make them completely underestimate you.

So... Pudding. I will say it now that Pudding is full-on protagonist and committed to serving under Luffy. No under-handed, traitorous schemes for her. Big Mom has no idea what she's lost.

I really like Pudding, along with Katakuri. They are my favorites of the Charlotte Family. Anyway, I didn't really like some of the things done with Pudding's character. It seemed Big Mom (and others) were abusive towards her, yet Pudding remained and it seriously didn't seem like she was ashamed of her eye when first introduced.

Plus, the Three-Eye Tribe being able to naturally read the Poneglyphs is something I'm a bit on the fence on with OP canon. That's a nice skill, but it almost takes away an aspect of Robin that made her unique.

So, fanfic interpretation here; an OOC-warning might have to come along for Pudding. I have an idea for how her character is going to act, (loosely-ish) based around how she acted in OP canon.

A Cry of Despair is heard! Don't Worry, For You Will Always Have a Place to Return to. Have Faith in your Nakama, Nami!

Chapter Summary

Nami finds herself in a desperate situation. She should have known that Arlong wouldn't keep his promise. When things take a turn for the worse, Nami thinks that she's lost everything. But Luffy doesn't want just anyone to be his Navigator, and so his crew steps up to fight for her sake.

Chapter Notes

Finally, finally got this chapter out, yay me. I swear, at times this chapter was like snails pulling teeth. If I did any more editing aka nitpicking, I would have held onto this even longer. Portions of this chapter ended up being in the next one.

Next chapter is where things get moving(ish), and I have a good ol' interlude chapter planned for Chapter Twenty-two.

I'm gonna be busy these coming months and won't be updating or have a chance to write, so a longer chapter for all you awesome lovelies is here.

Warnings: Violence and mentions of it, death, feels, stress, panic attacks, excessive hugging

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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both her and Gaara. That furious, unblinking gaze was set upon her; along with a suffocating force that made her too terrified to even move much less breathe. “Where are the others?!”

Oh, shit.

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The sand whirled around them, billowing like waves, drawing closer and closer. Nami had seen Gaara get angry before, and to have that anger directed at *her* was terrifying. She couldn't back away or move anywhere, because that sand was everywhere – it even rose above her by several feet and wound around her ankles – making any escape she'd normally employ impossible.

“Gaara, please, let me explain!” Nami pleaded.

“You left my brother, Captain, and Usopp behind!” Gaara shouted. “You took our home!”

“I'm sorry—*EEK!*” Nami felt sand scrape across her back, arms and legs, thankfully drawing only a *little* blood. They weren't serious injuries, but seeing that Gaara was willing to do *that* much wasn't promising. This was likely a warning.

“You are *going* to take us back.” Gaara stated matter-of-factly. “Then Captain can find a new Navigator.”

Sweat rolled down Nami's face. She could only keep calm on the surface thanks to having to bluff her way out of other dangerous situations. “Eh, Luffy invited me, remember?”

“This was a temporary alliance for an end goal. You said that yourself. If you are nowhere to be found, then Captain will just have to find a new Navigator.”

The implications of that...was Gaara threatening her?! Nami gulped fearfully.

“Either take us back or I'll kill you. I know enough about navigation to get by.”

“Listen, I *can't!* At least not right now, alright?” Nami felt hot tears in her eyes. “I'll explain everything, just...give me some time, okay? Please!”

Gaara glared at her, and cocked his head as if he were evaluating the situation. Slowly, the sand flowed back into his gourd.

“You better have a *really* good explanation for this.”

Nami nodded, and took in several gasping breaths. She hadn’t even realized she had been holding her breath. Earning Gaara’s ire wasn’t something she *ever* wanted to experience again. Nami made her way to the bedroom, very well aware that Gaara was basically acting as her shadow.

“Do you...do you really have to follow so close?”

“My brother is currently injured and can’t defend himself. I’m making sure you aren’t going to do anything to him.”

“I won’t, just...whatever.”

Nami slipped on a sleeveless top and shorts, absentmindedly pocketing the contents from her skirt into her shorts, and a dagger just in case. Seriously, what kid his age wouldn’t turn away and blush at seeing a girl in her underwear?! Gaara simply stared unblinkingly with no reaction.

She also quickly applied a few bandages to the worst of the scrapes. Nami took a deep breath as she pulled out several stacks of belli from her stash and stuffed it into a spare pillowcase. She then lugged the rest of it out on the deck, with Gaara silently watching her struggle.

“Listen, Gaara, please.” Nami wiped her brow. “I really need to take care of some things, so...I’m going to dock Merry over there, you see that orange grove? From where we are, the others’ll definitely spot us coming from Baratie.”

“Very well. Start explaining.”

“...I...” Nami sighed, and turned her shoulder towards Gaara, “I’m a member of Arlong’s crew.”

“You said you hate Pirates.”

“I do. Except...” It was difficult to talk about. It was none of Gaara’s or *anyone else’s* business. She had been handling all of this on her own for years, and would continue to do so. “Pirates took everything from me. But everything’s looking up, now,” holding up the pillowcase, “Once I take this to Arlong, everything will be fine.”

Just then, there was a loud yawn, and Zoro meandered out onto the deck. “That was a nice nap...”

“You really shouldn’t be moving after an injury like that.” Nami advised, mostly because she wanted to change the topic. Gaara briefly glanced at Zoro with relief, but he didn’t move from his spot. In fact, his attention was back on Nami within seconds. Dammit.

Zoro gave her an annoyed wave. “Whatever, it’s fine. I got some sleep; that’s all I needed.”

“That’s not how it works!” Nami argued. “Jeez, you people!”

“Anyway, did Luffy convince those cooks to...” Zoro trailed off as he glanced around and his eyes narrowed. “Where’re the others? Did they get lost or somethin’?”

“Nami left them behind.”

“What.” Zoro’s voice held a sharp edge as he turned towards Nami, his silver eyes glinting dangerously, clearly looking for an explanation as well. His left hand rested on his white sword.

Crap. She *really* didn’t want to be the subject of *two* angry and powerful people’s indignation.

“Look, I’m taking you to my home where you can stay with my sister until I’m finished with everything, which won’t take long. Then you can have your ship back!”

“If we hadn’t been here, did you really intend to return it?” Zoro asked, and when Nami didn’t answer right away; instead looking to the side, because really... If, *if* the others actually did manage to track them here, it would have been some incredible luck on their parts. The note didn’t indicate where she was going, after all.

Zoro’s anger at Nami’s lack of response seemed to seep out in thankfully controlled levels. “Merry wasn’t yours to take.”

“I’m *sorry*, alright!” Nami shot back. “You don’t get it! You don’t understand *anything*! I *didn’t have* a choice. I don’t want the ship, you can have it back when...”

They had neared the village by now, and quickly came upon a grove of orange trees. Nami saw movement before the two Pirates did and she suddenly shoved them towards the cabin. This elicited a grunt of

pain from Zoro (she was so right about it being too soon for him to move!) and Gaara stalked beside her still acting like a leering shadow.

“Get in there and *stay* there until I’m gone from the orange grove, alright? You can go in the house, and my sister, Nojiko will help you out.” Quickly motioning to the sacks that held her treasure, “Take this money when you go, and Nojiko will take care of it.”

Zoro was ready to argue, but he saw the pleading and frankly *scared* and *desperate* look in her eyes. “Whatever you do, *don’t* draw any attention to yourselves!”

With that, she slammed the door closed. Everything was far too stressful. Steering the ship closer, she stopped just far enough out where she could use a boat to row the rest of the way. Nami couldn’t lift the anchor, so she tied Merry to one of the nearby trees.

Nojiko was standing there, looking somewhat nervous, but was doing her best to hide it behind a far-too-tight casual smile. “Welcome home, Nami!”

“Nojiko,” Nami smiled at her sister, wishing she could tell her the good news, but now wasn’t the time. She wanted to hand the money to Arlong directly; and not risk something happening to it while in transit. Casually putting a hand on her hip, Nami then glanced up at the pufferfish-Fishman and coolly greeted, “Bando. What a pleasant surprise. Why’re you here?”

“You were late by three days. Was coming here to see if your sis had heard from you.” Bando replied. “Arlong’s missed you, Nami-chan.”

“Well, I’m here now. I have news for Arlong that he’s *just* going to love.”

Bando leaned to the side a bit, eyeing Merry. “Where’d you get that?”

“Just off a group of fools who I played.”

“Huh...kinda harsh. That’s just like Nami-chan!”

Nami scoffed. “My damsel in distress role can make any idiot drop their guard and their wallets. Let’s go see Arlong, now.”

Nami waved at Nojiko, and walked away with Bando. She saw that Chuu was there as well, and Nami subtly took in a few deep breaths to calm herself. While there was a likelihood of not having to worry

about the two on the ship, if anything happened to Arlong's men, he'd more than certainly want to pay any unfortunate Humans back in full and then some.

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Nojiko had settled down at the table for some afternoon tea when there was a knock at the door. Wondering who it could be, she opened to find two people; a heavily bandaged green-haired guy and a scowling redhead, each carrying a large sack filled with treasure. The redhead carried his sack with what looked to be...sand?

“...Yes?” Nojiko questioned.

The redhead glared as he said, “Nami stole our ship while we were on it and told us to talk to you.”

Nojiko gawked. Stole their ship...her eyes drifted over to the ship a few miles out from the grove. Strange...there was still the boat Nami had rowed over on; and neither of these guys were wet like they had gone swimming. How had they come over? What exactly had Nami done? She knew that Nami had had to often resort to unscrupulous acts to gather all that money; but it seemed that these guys had been unwittingly caught up in her sister's exploits.

“What?”

An awkward silence descended, and to not drag it any longer, Zoro quickly introduced himself and Gaara, adding, “Nami told us to stay here while she dealt with Arlong... you're Nojiko, right? Her sister?”

“Yeah. Come in...” Nojiko invited, and she directed them to put the treasure in one of the rooms, and then promptly went about playing host. “Here, I'll get you some tea. Do you want it hot or iced?”

“...Iced, please.” Gaara answered with clearly forced politeness.

“Same.” Zoro said with his usual brusque manner. He would have preferred alcohol, but that seemed like it would have to wait.

Once they had their drinks, Nojiko had to ask, “So...how'd you meet my sister?”

From there, Nojiko learned of Buggy – as both brothers had to give various details about the events when one or the other was telling the story. There was quite a bit of complaining from Gaara about how

Nami wanted to betray their Captain, Luffy.

There was a lot of talk about another brother named Naruto; their Captain Luffy – whom Gaara admired but Zoro seemed to think was a “lucky idiot”; Usopp, and the events at the Baratie – and now they were here. It was clear to Nojiko that Zoro was annoyed at Nami; while Gaara glared at his glass with every mention of her. It was rather surprising that his glass didn’t crack with the intensity of the glare.

Finally, Zoro asked, “What’s the deal with Arlong? Nami claims to hate Pirates, yet she’s already part of a crew.”

Nojiko sat up in her seat. “What? She didn’t tell you?” seeing the two shake their heads, Nojiko huffed under her breath, “I can understand why,” while she mentally complained, *“*Gee, thanks a lot, Nami.*”*

Leaning back in her seat, Nojiko studied the brothers for a moment. They most definitely weren’t related; and judging by their irritated commentary about Nami, she wasn’t their favorite person in the world right then.

“I need you two to understand something about my sister, please. Before you decide to just hate her and think that she’s selfish. Nami is doing all of this for a reason. Will you listen to what I tell you?”

“...Fine.” Zoro muttered irritably, while Gaara shrugged but didn’t protest.

Nojiko then proceeded to tell the brothers about a woman named Belle’mere, and how she took in two orphaned girls; even when others thought that she couldn’t take care of two kids when it seemed that Belle’mere could hardly take care of herself at times. How she sacrificed so much for these girls who unexpectedly came into her life. How Belle’mere wouldn’t eat and would skip on luxuries for herself so her two girls could have food or clothing.

“She always had an excuse for not eating, you know.” Nojiko said with a sad smile as a finger traced the rim of her glass. “She was on a new diet, or wasn’t in the mood for what we were eating...” Nojiko gave a small laugh. “She got so creative and ridiculous sometimes, like, she had to give her portion to these elves that lived in the walls... but, children can only be fooled for so long, you know?”

Zoro wasn’t looking at her. “...Yeah...”

Gaara's gaze quickly went to Zoro and hovered for several seconds before he stared at the table, no longer glaring. Both of their expressions were odd.

"Sorry, sorry," Nojiko said with a humorless laugh. "I'm getting a little reminiscent since tomorrow is the day that Belle'mere..." she trailed off, and took a deep breath. This was always difficult, even after so long. Talking about things like this never seemed to get easier.

She then told them about that day, Nami getting upset and having a fight with Belle'mere, and Belle'mere wanting to make it up to her somehow. How Arlong came and demanded money from everyone living on the island. How they only had enough money for either Belle'mere alone or the two girls living with her.

How Belle'mere tried to stand up to but ultimately failed against Arlong – and because Belle'mere loved being a mother so much, she wouldn't and could *never* deny Nojiko and Nami as being *hers*. There was Arlong's cold and cruel execution of her, and when the Fishmen realized what Nami could do with her navigation and topography skills, they took her and branded her. How he built a ridiculous base and if people couldn't afford to pay, they were killed very publicly – or their villages were destroyed. It didn't matter who they were; men, women, even children.

"Nami made a deal with Arlong, to buy back our village from him. 2,000,000 belli." Nojiko scoffed. "Apparently his reasoning was, 1,000,000 for every member of your family – that was for me, and Nami got a free pass as a member of his crew, and then the remaining million for the entire village. The price of love, he called it. Tch! The bastard.

"Nami's been saving up, she has around a million, now." Nojiko explained, looking hopeful. "Once she has all of it, then Arlong has promised to let Nami buy back Cocoyashi village – he likes money, so he won't go back on that. Even back then, with everything that was going on, she made sure to get it in writing."

"Why can't she just give it to him gradually?" Gaara asked.

"That would be ideal or more practical, would it not?" Nojiko shook her head. "The terms state she has to hand it over all at once, while giving him a percentage of what she collects. He purposely made sure she would be working for him as long as possible – that's the only reason I can think of that he would have such a ridiculous condition."

Zoro suddenly stood up. “I’m going for a walk. I’m gonna go see if the others have arrived while I’m at it. Sand-brat, stay here in case the others come here.”

“But...how do you know if *when* they’re coming? What if you get lost?”

“I don’t get lost.” Zoro stated as he opened the door to the closet, followed by the bathroom. Zoro scowled as if the doors had offended him. With a deep breath, he stepped forward and faded out – much to Nojiko’s shock.

The two inside the house saw him pass the window several times before he was gone. After Zoro left, silence descended on Nojiko and Gaara.

Gaara sat there, thinking. Nami had people here that she loved and was willing to do anything for. He could understand that. Gaara could understand that *very* well. He remembered how he felt when there had been a threat of feeling like he was going to lose his brothers. Naruto and Zoro were his world – and that world had gotten a little bigger with Luffy and Usopp – and likely even one or two of those cooks at the Baratie.

Nami wasn’t exactly his favorite person – she had lied about knowing them and had gotten them mixed up in her troubles (even though it had worked out). She had taken Merry and had split their crew (family) up. But yet... Gaara somehow understood Nami.

She was under a lot of pressure to get that money. She was doing what she did to collect all that money. Knowing what he did about Nami and Arlong... The money in the pillowcase – that had to have been what it was all for. Perhaps today Nami could finally get her village back. Maybe Luffy could get his Navigator after all.

Gaara was just about to tell Nojiko about the money in the pillowcase, when – there were noises of many people outside. Nojiko cocked an eyebrow and sighed.

“Stay put, kid. I don’t want Arlong’s crew to know you’re here.”

Nojiko went outside, with Gaara glaring at her back. He wasn’t *that* much of a kid! Ichibi laughed at him, and Gaara muttered, “Don’t make me put you in the sphere again.”

That empty threat only got Ichibi to laugh harder. \ “**Roronoa is**

*right! You are pretty fuckin' cute when you make threats!" *

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Outside, Nojiko and Genzo both stared in horror as Marines were tearing apart Belle'mere's orange grove. A mousey-looking man named Nezumi (aptly named, in Nojiko's opinion) was ordering his men to find the treasure buried there.

"There *isn't* any treasure here!" Nojiko shouted.

"What the hell?!" Genzo yelled. "You didn't say anything about doing *this*! You said you just wanted to ask Nojiko some questions!"

Captain Nezumi scoffed. "And if I said I was looking for stolen treasure that rightfully belongs to the Marines as evidence, you wouldn't have led me here."

Genzo glared at the man spitefully at being called out.

"What do you mean by *evidence*?!" Genzo demanded. "That's a load of bullshit!"

"There isn't *any* treasure here!" Nojiko insisted. "Why are you *here* when Arlong has been terrorizing these islands for eight years?! *Why* aren't you arresting *him*?!"

Nezumi's gaze slid over to her. "On what grounds, exactly?"

Nojiko's eyes widened in realization before anger took over and fiercely shoved all rationale to the side.

"You slimy bastard!" Nojiko shouted as she punched the Marine who squealed as he was struck.

"Nojiko!" Genzo cried out. "Stop!"

"You bitch!" Nezumi shrieked. He pulled out a flintlock and fired, hitting Nojiko in the shoulder.

When Genzo rushed at him in defense of Nojiko, he received a shot in the stomach for his efforts.

Just then, a shout over by the trees that lined the edge of their property. "Sir, there's a bunch of treasure here!"

Nojiko and Genzo both paled.

“No treasure’ huh?” Nezumi questioned with a smirk.

“That treasure is for the people! It’s to buy our island from Arlong!” Nojiko begged desperately.

“I’m sorry to say it, but it belongs to the Marines as evidence, now.” Nezumi said, not sounding the least bit sorry at all.

“We have a contract with Arlong! Ask him!” Nojiko continued, begging desperately. “He’s promised to give back our village if Nami gives him that treasure!”

“But there’s the issue of said treasure being acquired through illegal means,” Nezumi stated condescendingly. “Plus, can a contract with a known Pirate really be considered valid? As a Marine, I unfortunately cannot take such a thing into consideration. Be thankful that as a kindness, I’m not arresting you for consorting with Pirates.”

“Bastard.” Genzo hissed.

“Big sis Nojiko ...” a voice said quietly, “what...what’s going on?”

Everyone in the grove all turned at the voice. Nojiko in horror; and Genzo and Nezumi in surprise.

“A kid...?” Nezumi asked, looking at Gaara who was nervously fiddling with his scarf. According to the census, there were only supposed to be two kids in Cocoyashi – and well, that kid was a girl around six or seven years old, nor did she live with Nojiko.

Nezumi marched forward and grabbed Gaara by his hair. He missed the murderous glare that appeared on the boy’s face for a brief second as he dragged Gaara over to the others.

“Fraternizing with Pirates, hiding evidence from Marines, interfering with Marine investigation, and finally, illegally harboring someone in your home when there is a tax on the residents.” Nezumi threw Gaara to the ground, and Nojiko quickly checked on him. “Things are looking very bad for—“

“Are you going to kill us?” Gaara asked, staring up at Nezumi unblinkingly.

Nezumi felt that something about the kid was dangerous, but he attributed the nervous feeling to the strange raccoon-like eyes that glared unblinkingly up at him. Using bravado to mask his uneasiness,

Nezumi had the bright idea of viciously grabbing Gaara's scarf and yanking him to his feet.

He pointed his pistol to the boy's forehead. "Now, we can do this the hard way or the easy way. You're going to let us search your house and this orange grove for any more treasure. I mean, accidents are known to happen. You struggle with me, and the gun goes off. Poor kid gets caught in the crossfire."

"Sir!" another Marine was exiting the house. "There's two large sack-fuls of treasure in here!"

Nezumi's eyes gleamed greedily.

Genzo was starting to look worryingly pale from blood loss. But he had enough fight left in him to sneer, "You...you're lower than the collected scum between a Pirate's toes, threatening a kid."

Nezumi looked ready to blow a gasket from that simple comment.

"Did you see that, men?! He threatened me! Charged at me! I didn't have a choice; I feared for my life!"

He pointed the gun at Genzo and cocked the trigger and fired. Nojiko screamed with tears running down her face. It was Belle'mere all over again. She expected to see him lying there; blood pooling from his head. Instead...both she and Genzo stared at the wall of sand that had appeared between them and Nezumi.

"Your ego is just as small as your dick." Gaara growled as sand wrapped around Nezumi's hand, and a smile spread across Gaara's face as he reached towards the man and twisted his hand and clenched his fist.

Nezumi screamed as his arm twisted in place, and that got the attention of the others. They all drew their weapons, looking uneasy.

"Finally..." Gaara grinned, elatedly as he pushed his goggles up. "I *finally* get to fight all by myself!"

Sand encased Gaara's arms, and all the Marines could do at the sight was stare in shock. There were whispers of Crocodile among them; but none of that made sense because Crocodile was alive and well in the Grand Line.

Nezumi's arm was still caught by the sand, and the distinct smell of

urine hit Gaara, making him wrinkle his nose and glare in disgust at Nezumi – who started to tear up and whimper. Gaara used the Captain like a bat to strike several of his men several times. Dropping a dazed and bloody Nezumi, Gaara went after the others.

Marines certainly weren't Gaara's favorite people, and he had yet to meet one he actually liked. Did Coby count? Yes, he did. Belle'mere was probably someone who warranted his liking her. Since these were Marines, Gaara decided that he would only break things and not crush them. The entire time, Gaara had a grin on his face; which was thoroughly off-putting to the Marines.

As for the Marines, they found themselves in a rather nasty corner. *Nothing* could hit this kid! That sand would just rise up to block any bullets; and it took a total of three different Marines trying to strike the kid down with swords to realize that the sand would simply block the attacks and would reach out to break arms and legs.

Things were made even more troublesome since Gaara rapidly moved around as he fought; like a miniature blood-thirsty brawler. There was something else, too...a few of the Marines who came into contact with the sand were starting to feel lightheaded and started to collapse. They were looking deathly pale.

One Marine had the bright albeit desperate idea to try and hold Nojiko and Genzo hostage. With a shaking hand, he shouted, "Stand down!"

From where he was several feet away, Gaara slowly turned to glare at the Marine. The sand around one of his hands formed a mace – although it was jagged and awkward looking – and the Marine paled as Gaara snarled when he brought the mace down on top of the Marine.

"...ow..." came the pained whimper.

"I'm going to let you gather your injured *nakama* and you're going to run." Gaara said, with sand billowing dangerously around him. "Some of you have been poisoned, so I suggest you hurry and try to find the antidote, because I don't even know what it is."

"What, *seriously?!'*" one Marine demanded.

"I just got it earlier today."

The Marines were quick to gather themselves up and retreat. It

seemed that those who were still able to assist their comrades outnumbered the heavily injured. Whether that had been fortune or planning on Gaara's part, they didn't know and weren't sticking around to ask.

Gaara was next to Nojiko and Genzo immediately.

"I've never pulled a bullet out of someone's stomach," he informed, "So I'm not sure I can..."

"There's a town Doctor!" Genzo huffed out in pain when he tried to move.

Sand wrapped gently around the injured pair. "Tell me where to go."

Gaara took off running, but he paused briefly as he sniffed the air. Those Fishmen had just been here, but their scent still remained. The scent was particularly strong. There was a section of the trees where the ground looked a little...off? But since the Marines had already torn through the place, Gaara wasn't sure if they had already dug over here or not.

"Gaara?" Nojiko asked.

\ ***"Somethin' ain't right...you can taste it in the air, but you gotta get those two to a hospital kiddo. Especially that guy. He's lookin' like the damn Shinigami just might be knockin' on his door."*** \

Gaara then started running again, leaving behind the disarrayed orange field. Somewhere within the trees, a figure slowly rose out of the ground as dirt spilled off of him. The flatfish-Fishman gaped at the direction the retreating figure had taken.

"What...the...hell..."

Had Nami betrayed them? He had seen her shove those two guys around on the ship. Was she trying to stage a coup?

Soma stood up and brushed himself off. He had been terrified when that kid had been looking in his direction! But that was ridiculous, right? Right! It wasn't like he had something to worry about from a mere Human – a *child* no less – Devil Fruit or not. Soma ran over to where he had seen the Marines unearth the treasure, and then into the house – and sure enough, there was *a lot* of treasure.

Where had Nami gotten it all?

Soma then went to work gathering all of it. Because he was acting “outside of Arlong’s knowledge” Arlong was still technically keeping his end of the bargain. It was easy for Soma to carry the sacks with hardly a struggle, and he emptied the treasure in the orange grove of its contents. Peering down at the empty chest, Soma hauled the sacks over his shoulder and then leapt into the ocean to swim around to Arlong Park. It would be a terrible thing to lose their topographer.

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With Luffy, his crew, and the Bounty Hunters, they had been lucky to not be that far behind – this was only by an hour or so. Plus, they had gotten a good tail wind about halfway through; so they were making better time than they normally would have.

Both Naruto and Usopp were looking at his collection of Ninja tools.

“This pepper bomb is really potent!” Usopp praised with watery eyes, and Naruto beamed at the comment.

“Heh, thanks! I use it quite a bit.”

“I wonder...” Usopp pulled a few hollow pellets he had on hand out of his bag. “With how potent these are, I wonder if we could fill these up...?”

“Oh, like a condensed version, ‘ttebayou!”

“Yeah!” Usopp picked up a few metal-looking cords made with fine wire and weights.

“I use those,” Naruto pointed to the white-handled wires, “to trip or tie up people – or you can use these ones,” the black-handled wires, “to cut off body parts.” Naruto smiled quite happily with this knowledge, making Usopp slightly uneasy with how casual the younger boy was being about mutilating people – well, he *was* one of the Roronoa siblings... “I throw these ones at people to tie ‘em up, and these, you set ‘em up just right and when people run into them, they get cut.”

“Oh...huh...”

“You can take those,” Naruto motioned to the cords in Usopp’s hand, “Gaara can always make me more, and I still have a lot of fishing line and piano wire on Merry.”

It was Usopp's turn to beam. "Wow! Thanks, Naruto! Now, let's get these Pepper Pellets going!"

The two commenced with filling the small pellets with the pepper, and both were wearing cloths over their noses and mouths.

Naruto sighed after his third pellet-filling. "I wish Gaara were here, he could make this so much easier..."

"Well, I'm a Pepper Pellet-filling champion, so I'm pretty sure I've got your brother beat in that department."

"Really? I didn't know people gave awards for such things."

"Oh, yeah! They sure do!" Usopp went on about this strange championship and didn't really talk about whoever *they* were.

Both Johnny and Yosaku were clearly nervous about going up against Arlong, but Luffy reminded them with a laugh, "You guys don't have to fight with us, you know."

The Captain motioned to his crew. "I already have a pretty impressive crew, so I don't think we have anything to worry about!"

"Aw, shucks..." Naruto laughed and scratched his head.

"You...you really have that kind of faith in us Luffy?" Usopp asked.

"Well, *of course*, Usopp!" Luffy answered as if it were the most obvious thing. "I wouldn't pick just *anyone* to be on my crew."

"I'm glad that I've chosen to serve a man such as yourself, sweetie." Pudding offered some sort of specially-made drink, which Luffy happily accepted – and he absolutely beamed when Sanji wasn't far behind with some sort of meat. Luffy honestly didn't care what kind of meat it was; as long as it tasted good.

"Well, since you have that kind of faith in me..." Usopp flexed an arm. "I bet I could beat *any* Fishman we come across! *Singlehandedly!*"

"Yeah, Usopp, 'ttebayo!"

"So...what do fish-people look like?" Luffy asked.

"They're gorgeous..." Sanji said with a happy sigh. "Especially the Mermaids."

“The Fishmen aren’t so bad themselves...” Pudding replied with a smile and a soft blush. “Especially when they have tentacles.”

The comment went over the heads of a few of the members. Naruto frowned because Kyuubi was laughing. Luffy wasn’t sure why Johnny and Yosaku were blushing and embarrassment wafted off of them in droves.

“You...want to eat their tentacles?” Usopp questioned slowly. He felt as if he *should* know what Pudding was alluding to; he just couldn’t think as to why else Pudding would want to eat Fishman tentacles.

“You could. But that’s not the only thing you could do with them.”

“So, let me see here...” Usopp put his current project aside and pulled his sketchbook out. “Do Fishmen look something like this?”

Usopp drew a man’s armless torso with eight tentacles.

“Oh, um... not really? I don’t think?” While Usopp’s drawing skills were certainly to be commended, she rambled, “I mean, they *can* and *do* come in a variety of ways. I’ve only seen pictures of them, so... maybe? It is a good drawing.”

“It’s actually kinda creepy,” Naruto made a face. “If Fishmen look like that, I don’t think I want to meet any of ‘em, ‘ttebayou.”

“If Nami did end up at this Arlong Park place, I wonder if she’s secretly a Mermaid.” Sanji said wistfully.

Naruto raised his hand. “What’s a Mermaid?”

Sanji let out a cough, dropping his cigarette and stared at Naruto. He suddenly pulled his fellow blond into a hug as he lamented. “You poor kid... your thoughtless older brother didn’t teach you one of life’s most important lessons!”

Naruto arched an eyebrow dubiously. “...Which is Mermaids?”

Sanji blushed and his eyes turned to hearts as he explained, “A Mermaid is a gorgeous woman of the sea! Half-fish, half-Human! Their speaking voices are music to the ear!”

Luffy reached for the sketchpad. He put in a quick sketch. “So...you’re saying Nami secretly looks like this?”

Sanji took one look at the sketchpad – seeing a fishtail, which was

connected to...a fish with stick arms with knobby hands and hair similar to Nami's. Luffy had even added a bit of lipstick detail and eyelashes. Heck, he even added the little detail of her staff!

"You wanna die?!" Sanji demanded, kicking Luffy.

"OW!" Luffy massaged where the hit had struck. "You added Haki to that, you jerk!"

"I didn't hit *that* hard, shitty Captain!" Sanji replied. "Besides, you insulted Nami's beauty with that terrible drawing!"

Luffy started pulling at Sanji's face. "You can't do that to the Captain!"

"This is so nice and relaxing," Pudding said with a smile as she took a sip of her drink. "I'm happy that Sanji-dear is making friends."

The others slowly glanced from the noisy spectacle that was Sanji and Luffy to a tranquil Pudding and back.

Usopp scratched his head and looked on hesitantly. "If you say so..."

Pudding then called out, "Sanji-dear, the rest of the food should be ready to be served!"

Sanji immediately stopped messing around and quickly straightened out his suit as if nothing had happened.

"Food!" Luffy cheered, also forgetting about the fight.

A large amount of meat skewers was served, along with a bit of ramen.

"You can't be eating just ramen," Sanji said as he served the dish to Naruto. "So you have some extra vegetables in there as well."

"Fine," Naruto wasn't going to complain about having to eat more vegetables as long as he could have his beloved ramen.

Luffy was halfway through his fifth serving of meat when he glanced out towards the ocean. "There's something there..."

"What?" Yosaku peered out over the ocean looking where Luffy was.

Usopp covered his eyes to protect from the sun, and leaned out a bit as he tried to see what Luffy was seeing. "I don't see any..." when the ocean started to rise up, Usopp let out a squeaky, "...thing."

Various voices screamed. “GUAAAAHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

“So cool!” Luffy beamed.

“Oh, hey. It’s a sea cow.” Sanji casually observed.

“It’s so cute!” Pudding commented.

“Whoa…” Naruto grinned up at the sea monster. “Are you hungry, big guy, ‘tebayou?”

“Mooo~” the sea monster replied.

“Here!” Luffy threw some meat to the cow, which it clearly enjoyed.

“You’re such a little cutie!” Pudding cooed. “Come here, big guy!”

The cow lowered itself so that it was barely a foot from the Bounty Hunters’ ship – making the likes of Johnny, Yosaku, and Usopp nervous.

“Here you go, have some sweets, Spotty-chan!” Pudding gave the sea cow several cookies.

“Mooooo~!”

Spotty, as he was now dubbed, sighed and moaned in contentment as Naruto began scratching his chin.

“Hey, Spotty!” Luffy called out. “We’re looking for our friend, Nami! Do you know her?”

“Um…Luffy?” Usopp felt he had to point out, “How would uh, Spotty, know where Nami is?”

“Well, if Sanji believes she’s a Mermaid, then Spotty *should* know her, right?”

“I don’t think that’s how it works. He probably doesn’t even *know* Nami.”

“Moo?”

“Nami, she has red hair like this, and makes faces like this,” Luffy did his best Nami impression – which Sanji didn’t really seem to appreciate if his glaring and grumbling was any indication. “I like money and oranges’.”

Spotty groaned and cocked his head in confusion.

“Like this!” Naruto said, and he hinged into Nami. “I like beating up people for money and taking off their clothes, ‘ttebayou.”

Sanji’s jaw dropped and his eyes turned into hearts, even though he was well aware that this Nami was a fake. Naruto had commendable skills and attention to even minute detail. Like that mole on the back of Nami’s right arm; just near her elbow.

“MOO~!”

“Great! Take us there and we’ll give you more meat and Pudding’s cookies!” Luffy said.

Henging back, Naruto quickly grabbed some rope Johnny and Yosaku had on hand, which Luffy tied to Spotty’s horn, and they were off.

“I can’t believe that cow actually knows Nami...” Johnny muttered.

Naruto grinned. “Luffy just seems to have that kinda luck.”

It wouldn’t be long until they found their *nakama*. Luffy took a deep breath and reached out. On the barest edges of his senses, Nami was there – her nerves were going haywire. Zoro was...really annoyed and seemed angry about something. Gaara was in a strange mix of being ecstatic and angry about something.

Hmmm... he wondered what they were up to.

“Oh!” It wasn’t much longer when Usopp was the one to stand up and point, “Is that an island?”

He took out a telescope, and could see some sort of strange castle structure on one end of the island. He also saw... “Merry! I can see Merry over there!”

“Let’s go, Spotty!” Luffy called.

“MOOO~!”

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They all stared at the wrecked orange grove. There clearly had been a fight – and people had been seriously wounded.

“What the heck happened here?” Usopp asked in horror.

“Marines.” Sanji said, holding up a Marine cap that was covered in dirt and drops of blood. He tossed it back to the ground. “I don’t like this...”

Naruto got down on the ground and sniffed. “Nami was here...so was Gaara and Zoro-nii!” Naruto sniffed around a bit more, “I think the person who lives here was injured...there’s blood.”

“So...did the Marines attack or were the Marines attacked?” Yosaku asked, looking worried.

/ ***“I don’t sense any recent death here, so...maybe everyone is fine.”***/ Kyuubi offered a bit of comfort just to ease Naruto’s worry – it was giving him a mild headache.

“Something’s wrong.” Luffy said as he looked off into the distance. But he wasn’t talking about the surrounding destruction. “I don’t like this.”

Usopp gulped. If Luffy was acting like this, then that mean things were pretty bad.

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Arlong Park; before Luffy and his crew arrived:

Nami took a deep, calming breath as they approached the gates. She was so distracted, she almost didn’t notice the boy charging at them. She knew Chabo. Arlong had killed his father when the man had tried to stand up to him for one reason or another. Bando would easily use his spines to poison the kid and happily watch as Chabo died. Chuu would probably use him for target practice as he died – missing vital spots on purpose.

Before either Fishman could do anything, Nami whipped out her staff and hit Chabo across the face. The kid went flying, and he hit the ground with a painful-sounding grunt.

“Stupid kid.” Nami said coldly. “If you can’t beat *me*, then you have no chance with these guys. Now scram.”

Chabo was shaking in pain and in anger. “I hate you! I hope all of you die!”

“Beat it.” Nami said, raising her staff in a threatening manner.

Chabo ran away amidst the Fishmen's laughter.

"Still using those skills our men taught you? Our Nami is so impressive!" Bando praised.

Inwardly, Nami cringed. She didn't want to belong to *anyone*! But she smirked; she had been wearing this mask for years. "Yeah, of course I am."

There Arlong was, sitting at his throne. That toothy smile crossed his lips, and he greeted her. Nami took several more breaths. Soon, she – *all* of them would be free.

"Hello, Arlong." Nami marched up to him. "You remember our deal, right? 2,000,000 belli for the village?"

"How could I forget?" Arlong asked.

"Well, here it is." Nami presented the belli-filled pillowcase. "There's 3,000,000 in there. For the village and then some as incentive for you to leave us alone."

Arlong stared at the stacks of belli and blinked several times. This was impressive. He couldn't help but wonder what poor shmuck had lost all their money. His brethren were staring and muttering.

"Very well. Let's go get the contract for your village."

Nami's heart skipped a beat. She refused to smile like she wanted to. Following after Arlong, he walked with purpose. He paused outside of *that* room; that was the office and her prison. Something wasn't right.

Arlong opened the door, and motioned, "After you."

"But...isn't the contract in *your* room?" Nami questioned, while her brain screamed at her to get out of there. "Why--?"

Nami was cut off when there was a violent shove on her back and she crashed to the floor. Then, the door slammed and there was a click.

"NO! ARLONG! WE HAD A DEAL!" Nami was banging on the door and violently jiggling the door handle.

"The deal was that you'd buy the village, which you have." Arlong's voice sounded through the door; and she could *hear* the smirk in his voice. "But I *never* said I'd let you go, nor that I would leave Arlong Park. Now that you no longer have to buy Cocoyashi, you can focus

all your time on drawing *my* maps! *Shaahahahaha!*”

Nami’s skin crawled. She began banging and kicking the door. “Let me out of here!”

“Did you really think I’d let you and this island go so easily? After building this empire? I *own* you Nami!”

“YOU BASTARD! I’LL *KILL* YOU!!”

Arlong laughed again, and it seemed to echo around the room. It bounced around in her mind like a cruel joke; mocking her at every turn. She was such an *idiot*. She *should* have known! Nami had read the contract herself, but...somehow – no – Arlong had made absolutely sure that the contract worked in his favor. He had manipulated her words to benefit him. He had used her naïveté against her.

Nami was shaking. She broke.

It was all for nothing. It had *always* been for nothing. She would always be here. Nami would always be a slave and a prisoner to the man who had murdered her mother in cold blood and executed the townsfolk as an example.

All this time...all of this...all of her scams and betrayals had been for *nothing!* Nami screamed as she trashed the room. Shoving things off of her desk and ripping the papers off of the walls. She grabbed her chair and shoved it to the side as hard as she could, and one of its legs broke off. Nami wished it had at least broken at least a little more. It didn’t matter that the Fishmen would be angry at her. Nothing they did to her physically could hurt as much as she was hurting now.

She thought of the Pirates she had allied herself with – but no, why would *any* of them want to help her when she had betrayed them? Gaara was furious with her – and would be unwilling to help – he’d even discourage it. If someone had betrayed her like she had betrayed Luffy and the others, she’d think the person deserved to not get helped and be glad they got what was coming to them.

She would leave that person behind.

She *didn’t* need their help! She *never* needed *anyone’s* help! She had been doing *all* of this on her own! She had sweet-talked the Fishmen into training her to fight so that she could better serve Arlong. She had put up with the scoffing and the scathing looks from the villagers

ever since the day she got her mark...

Suddenly feeling exhausted, Nami collapsed to the floor – only to yelp when something sharp poked her in the leg. Nami adjusted herself and reached into her pocket, and withdrew the abstract orange charm Gaara had given her.

Looking at the stem...it could actually be long enough... Nami quickly ran to the door and jammed the stem into the keyhole. She shifted the charm around a bit before there was an audible **click**.

It actually worked!

Nami took out a portion of her staff then slowly opened the door. There was a Fishman standing guard, and he started, “Hey--!”

He was cut off when Nami hit him on the head with her staff with several whacks to his face. She also stabbed his leg with a knife she always carried on her person – just in case. He of course yowled in pain, and Nami wacked him with her staff more than once. She ran as fast as she could.

The Fishmen looked conflicted as they watched Nami make a break for it. She easily scaled the wall; up and over.

“Should one of us go after her?”

“But Arlong said to stay here...I mean...”

“Well...with whatever’s going on in town, what really takes priority here?”

“It was Lenard’s job to watch her, so he can take all the blame!”

There were mutters of agreement. A few quiet moments passed, before conversation awkwardly picked up. This was mostly to distract each other and themselves.

All conversation abruptly ceased when Zoro was suddenly standing in the midst of the Fishmen.

“Huh? How’d I end up here...?” Zoro muttered. He then seemed to realize the people who were staring at him.

“How’d you get in here?!” one Fishman demanded.

“Where’d he even come from?!” another yelled.

“A Pu-Man!” one startled Fishman pointed at Zoro, who merely raised an unimpressed brow at the term.

“Stop saying that, Geraldo!” another Fishman shouted irritably. “It’s *never* caught on and no-one but *you* uses it!”

“So…” Zoro smirked as he flicked his blade. “You guys must be the Fishmen I’ve heard so much about, right?”

He would apologize to the others later for going out on his own and cutting these people down, but right now, he had to let loose.

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This was bad! So very, very bad! Nami was racing home to tell Nojiko what had happened. Nami didn’t stop running until – she froze when she saw them. When did they… How did they know where to look?

“Hey, Nami!” Luffy greeted.

Why was he here?! How had he even known where to come?

“What are you doing here?” Nami asked coldly. She felt as if ice was crawling on her back. Luffy was staring at her with that all-too pensive look. Out of all of them, Nami was worried about him most of all. Luffy read her far too easily.

“Hiii~ Nami-swan, do you remember me? I’m Sanji!”

“Hello, Nami-chan.” Pudding greeting with a smile and clapped her hands together. “I’ve heard you’re on our crew as well. It’s nice to be on a crew with more than just one woman. I’m excited about traveling together. I’m looking forward to eating chocolate, gossiping about boys, and braiding each other’s hair.”

“As if.” Nami scoffed. “Don’t you people realize I was just using you? And me? Be friends with you? That’s a fantastic joke.”

“Hmm.” Pudding gave a glare and a scoff before she turned to Sanji and complained, “She rejected my offer of friendship, Sanji! How can she be so mean?!” Pudding muttered, “I want to eat my feelings now.”

“There, there.” Sanji said, patting Pudding’s head, while Pudding had a suspicious glare on her face that was directed towards Nami.

Naruto was staring at Nami with a frown. She looked completely worn-down. “Are you alright, Nami?”

"I'm fine. Why wouldn't I be?"

"You're lying." Luffy replied. He tilted his head a bit to stare at Nami's shoulder. "That's Arlong's mark, isn't it."

It wasn't a question.

"He's the man I truly serve. I'm loyal only to him." Nami bragged. "You made a mistake, coming here. You should just leave."

Luffy was looking at her with those obsidian eyes. "You're lying again."

"Look," Nami snapped. "I don't need this! I don't have time for this! Zoro and Gaara are with my sister at the orange grove on the west side of the island, and Merry's there too. So you can just take your ship back and go!"

"That was--?!" Johnny looked really uncomfortable.

"We just came from there, Nami-swan." Sanji said. "There was no-one at the house and there had been some sort of fight."

Nami paled. "What?"

"We can help you, Nami." Luffy offered.

"I don't want your help!" Nami shouted. "Don't you know how to take a hint?! Just leave me and this island's problems alone! Otherwise, you'll die!"

"No!" Luffy argued. "I chose *you* as my Navigator!"

"Well, you chose wrong. I have to go."

"I'm staying here until you agree to join my crew! For *real* this time!"

Nami ignored him as she ran passed them and disappeared down the road.

Luffy sighed as he adjusted his hat. He plopped down on the grass. "I know Nami needs our help, but..." Luffy pouted, "I just don't know how, yet."

"Perhaps we should find the others and go from there." Sanji suggested.

“Oh, hey it’s you guys.”

“AAAAAUUUUHHHHHHHHH!!!”

“Hey, Zoro.” Luffy greeted casually. “Glad to see you’re up and walking around!”

“Whoa, what the hell?!” Sanji whirled around to face Zoro – who – was standing several feet away from the path.

“Zoro-aniki, please, *don’t* do that!” Yosaku gasped, putting a hand over his heart which threatened to beat out of his chest.

“I never missed your sudden popping-out-of-nowhere...” Johnny agreed.

“You don’t look like you should be moving...that’s quite a bit of blood...” Pudding pointed out, looking at his pants and bandages.

“Oh. None of its mine,” Zoro said casually before turning to complain about a more important matter. “You guys seriously got lost. I was looking all over for you.”

Zoro grunted in pain when Naruto ran into him to give him a tight hug. Zoro simply smiled as he ruffled Naruto’s hair. “Sorry for worrying you, brat.”

“We aren’t the ones who get lost, Zoro-nii.” Naruto’s voice was muffled from burying his face in Zoro’s stomach. Naruto pulled back only to deliver a swift punch to Zoro’s side – much to the shock of everyone. While Naruto did avoid hitting his injuries, it still made Zoro double over in pain.

“What the *fuck*, brat?!” Zoro yelled out with a wheeze.

“I was so scared, you dumbass, Dattebayo!” Naruto shot back. “What if Mihawk had killed...” Naruto thought of the worst scenario. “I can’t lose you, too...”

Zoro huffed, and winced slightly at the small action. He placed a hand on Naruto’s head. “Naruto, listen to me...” being quiet serious, “That man’s been my end-goal all along, and I still have a long way to go. There are things in this world that you have to be willin’ to sacrifice your life for.” Zoro bent down a bit so that he was level with Naruto. “If you really want to be a great Shinobi one day, you’ll have to risk your life for it; otherwise it’s not worth having, understand?”

Naruto nodded sullenly.

“Sides, I promised Luffy on this sword that I wouldn’t lose again.”

“I get it, but I still don’t like you taking risks like that, ‘ttebayou...”
Naruto huffed and childishly crossed his arms. Zoro rolled his eyes and ruffled Naruto’s hair.

“Damn brat.”

Naruto glanced up at his brother. “Where’d you get the shirt?”

“Off of someone who didn’t need it anymore.”

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She hadn’t wanted to believe it.

Nami stared at the damage Belle’mere’s orange grove had taken. Several trees had either been ripped up or broken. The house had been broken into, and nearly everything was scattered and broken. All of the treasure that had been hidden in the grove was gone. Nami quickly rowed out to Merry, because she had to make sure – she didn’t doubt either Zoro or Gaara. Her treasure was gone from there, too.

Taking in shaky breaths as she rowed back, Nami clamored out of the boat and onto land. Her vision was getting dark, and her breathing was erratic. She put a hand to her chest, which was rapidly starting to feel increasingly tight, trying to calm herself. Where was Nojiko? Was she okay? She needed her sister more than anything right then.

Forcing herself to stand, Nami started to run. If something happened to Nojiko...she couldn’t handle it. She couldn’t handle being alone. If Nojiko had been injured, then logically...there was only one place she could be.

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Earlier in town; after Gaara fought the Marines and just before Nami’s escape:

Gaara carried his passengers easily, and even though they had seen what the sand could do, both Genzo and Nojiko somehow knew that they didn’t have to worry. They had just reached the town, and people of course, weren’t outside.

“Take a right here, at the store, and the hospital is the third building

on our left.” Nojiko instructed, and when Gaara turned the corner, his sand shot up protectively when someone bumped into him.

“Whoa, what the hell?!” an angry voice sounded.

When the sand lowered, Nojiko’s eyes widened, and somehow, Genzo looked even paler. Gaara just blinked.

“Are you a Fishman?”

“Stupid Human!” the Fishman jumped back up to his feet. “Don’t you know what happens to those who defy... the... Ar...long...?”

He trailed off when Gaara simply stepped around him and purposefully continued on his way. “Excuse me, I have to go...Sorry I bumped into you.”

“Hey! I’m talking to you!”

“Goya, what’s goin’ on?” a second Fishman asked.

Goya blocked Gaara from leaving. “This brat thought he could defy us!”

“Stupid kid, don’t you know who we are?”

“No. Why should I?”

Quite obviously, both of the Fishmen were insulted by the kid’s simple response.

“Wait...who is this kid? I don’t recognize him.” Goya said, leaning towards Gaara.

Gaara glared up at him. “I don’t care. Move.”

“Ha! Make me.”

“Alright.”

While expertly balancing his passengers who remained in an upright position; Gaara jumped off the ground and delivered a roundhouse kick which sent Goya flying several feet. Goya was down, while Genzo, Nojiko, and Goya’s friend all gaped in shock. Gaara continued on with his original quest.

Grabbing up Goya, the Fishman glared at the redhead in anger. He

had to report to Arlong about this! Clearly, someone was trying to rise up against him!

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Sometime after Zoro's Arrival in Arlong Park:

Hachi hummed a tune to himself, oblivious to what was currently happening on the other side of the wall that separated Arlong Park from the ocean. It was time for Mohmoo to eat. Hachi called for the sea cow, but got no response. That was strange... Normally, Mohmoo came within minutes of being called.

Well...Mohmoo would show up later. Might as well fish!

Hachi was convinced that he had the ultimate catch as he tried to reel it in; except...the hook had caught his pants. Looks like the ultimate catch was him! Of course, Hachi was the ultimate catch in the East Blue, no doubt about that!

Hachi's self-narration and appreciation was interrupted when a voice said, "Hey. You a Fishman too?"

Hachi jolted and whirled around, glancing up to see some guy on the wall – and Hachi may or may not have squeaked and spit ink in his surprise.

"Wha-? Who are you? Speak up, now!" Hachi pointed to himself. "Who? Me? I'm Hachan, a Fishman! My friends call me Hachi!" Flexing and wiggling his arms expertly, "I'm an amazing octopus-Fishman!"

"Sure..." the guy rolled his eyes – which Hachi noticed were a unique shade of silver. Huh...hadn't he seen silver eyes like that somewhere before? Didn't matter.

"You look like a regular Human...Are you a Marine? Or simply one of his guests? Arlong is willing to make deals with some Humans."

"A guest..." Zoro glanced over his shoulder at all the downed and bloody Fishmen before turning back to Hachi. "Yeah... A guest."

"Have you seen Arlong yet?"

"Nope."

"Oh! He's not here? Huh, I wonder why..."

“So, you don’t know either, huh...that’s inconvenient...” Zoro sighed. “Guess I’ll just have to head back to Cocoyashi.”

“Oh, you wanna go to Cocoyashi?” Hachi asked. He motioned to the pot in the water he used to transport Humans and cargo. “Hop in! I’ll take you!”

“If you’re sure.” Zoro said and climbed in.

“Of course! You’re an honored guest!”

Hachi swam quickly, making various conversation, but for some reason the guest was oddly quiet. Well, perhaps he wasn’t the conversational type; but rather the listening type. So, Hachi talked about all the interesting things he had seen or done lately.

“Here we are, Coco...” Hachi’s voice trailed off when he looked at the *empty* pot. A cold shiver ran down his spine. Was this a...a *ghost*?! Ghosts were thought to bring bad omens. Hachi wondered if he should pray to the Great Ox who guarded the oceans and hope that ill-luck didn’t strike him down...

It would be best to pretend none of this happened. Yeah...Hachi had really good ideas! But...there was a sense of foreboding lingering over Hachi. Maybe ignoring it *wasn’t* such a good idea. He hoped that Arlong would return soon so that he could tell him that he saw a silver-eyed ghost and his Captain would know what to do.

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Somewhere on the island, Zoro was muttering irritably to himself, “How’d I get here?”

The damn paths had moved when he was adjusting himself into a more comfortable position in the pot...hopefully he could find the others before they got hopelessly lost.

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Arlong and various other crewmembers gawked at the sight of their fallen brethren. Who did this?! Thankfully, none of them were dead. But all of them had been wounded badly enough that it would take roughly a few days to a week or two to recover. Not only that...but Nami was gone too!

Hachi entered the yard just then, and his eyes widened and his jaw

dropped.

“Hachi...” Arlong growled. “What happened?”

“It was...” Hachi gasped. “He said he was your guest, but...he was a silver-eyed ghost! I was transporting him across the water and he just disappeared like he was never there!”

Arlong’s eyes widened. “Silver eyes? Ghost...? Like... *Fumiko’s* family...? How is that possible?”

Arlong didn’t believe in ghosts or bad omens nonsense, even considering who his sister was. But a “ghost” with silver eyes? Fumiko had been a member of the Sun Pirates and had carried their brand with the pride that it deserved – and had a ridiculous tendency to get lost and had a “ghosting” technique. But even after Fisher Tiger, she still refused to hate Humans, because she apparently had Human somewhere in her blood.

Arlong resented her, because she didn’t share his values and she wouldn’t contribute to the cause. Fumiko had refused to lend him her strength, and had instead scoffed at him. She had looked down on him, saying he didn’t have the right to hate Humans like he did when he had never personally suffered at their hand or some nonsense like that.

“It was probably just a Devil-Fruit user.” Arlong reasoned, although he felt that was reaching. Because how would a mere, lowly Human share such a unique trait and power like Fumiko and her family?

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Nami burst into the hospital, frightening Doctor Nako, Nojiko, and Genzo. Gaara simply glanced up at her. Nami took one look at her sister and Genzo and burst into relieved tears.

“You’re...you’re alright!”

Nojiko and Nami were in each other’s arms in a few quick steps, giving tight hugs.

Nojiko informed her sister. “Gaara protected us.”

Nami didn’t even hesitate, she suddenly ran across the room and pulled Gaara into a hug – and he stiffened – but didn’t retaliate or pull away.

“Thank you, Gaara...” Nami whispered by his ear. She was so glad to have been wrong about him. “Nojiko and Gen-san are the only family I have left. Thank you...”

“...Y-yeah...” Gaara said quietly, looking at the floor.

Feeling exhausted, Nami wiped her tears then turned back to the others. “What happened?”

“The Marines did.” Genzo spat angrily. “Those bastards...at first, they told me they needed to question Nojiko, but couldn’t give any details as to why...I’m such a fool! I took them to the orange grove. *Then*, they tried taking the treasure! They claimed it belonged to the Marines because it was stolen or some bullshit reasoning like that!”

Nako put a hand on Genzo to keep him from moving too much and tearing his stitches.

“That rat Captain Nezumi shot both me and Genzo-san, and threatened Gaara...and so Gaara beat them all up and then brought us here after they retreated.”

Settled down somewhat, Genzo smiled. “The treasure’s still safe, so we’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“No...no, it’s *not!*” Nami was nearly yelling, “I...got the money. I got *all* of it thanks to Gaara’s crew, and I turned it in to Arlong...” all of them were staring at her in shock. She had done it! Except... “Arlong lied...about the contract...he had it where I’d *still* be working for him! He tried locking me up, but I escaped...I went back home, and *all* the treasure’s gone!”

“That bastard!” Genzo raged again, while Nako yelled at him to stop moving.

Nojiko’s hand went up to her mouth in shock.

“How did the rat-face know about the treasure?” Gaara asked from his spot on a spare bed. Everyone turned to look at him. “If he told you he knew about the treasure, you wouldn’t have led him to where it was buried. Was it common knowledge?”

“I didn’t tell *anyone* except for Nojiko and Genzo...!” Nami said in mounting horror.

“This is the first I’ve heard of it.” Nako muttered.

\ “*That was a lie...yet it wasn’t? For some reason...*” \ Ichibi was scratching his head about the strange response.

Genzo’s fists shook as he realized what this meant. “He knew because Arlong *told* him.”

It was a grim realization that came over the Cocoyashi villagers. Arlong was never going to let them go; and he especially, was *never* intending to let Nami leave.

Genzo slowly sat up with a pained grunt, and Nako didn’t bother to tell him to stop moving. In fact, he had removed his sunglasses and was massaging the bridge of his nose. The Doctor’s shoulders were slumped, clearly in defeat or maybe even grim acceptance.

“Gaara.” Genzo’s tone was serious. “Your crew is coming to retrieve you, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I saw them on the island already.” Nami quietly provided.

“Good. Nami...Nojiko.” Genzo’s shoulders drooped ever so briefly as he took in a shaky breath, but he forced himself to keep his composure and he stood up straight. “When Gaara meets up with his crew again, both of you will be leaving with them.”

“What?!” Nami shouted.

“Gen-san!” Nojiko protested, but winced as her shoulder throbbed.

“Arlong has effectively proven he isn’t *ever* going to let us *or* Nami go! We have no choice *but* to fight back!” Genzo pointed out. “While the Arlong Pirates are distracted by fighting *us*, you two can leave with the Pirates.”

“You can’t do that!” Nami argued, looking horrified. “If you do that, you’ll die!”

“Don’t you think I *know* that?!” Genzo shouted. He grimaced painfully, but that didn’t stop him as he forced himself to not react to the pain.

“Dammit, there’s no way I could face Belle’mere in the afterlife knowing I didn’t do *everything* I could in my limited power to keep you girls safe!” Genzo’s hand sliced across the air to help make his point. “It would make her sacrifice for *nothing!*”

“No.” Defiant, exhausted, tear-filled eyes glared up at Genzo. Nami unsheathed a dagger in her desperation. “I-I won’t let you.”

“Nami!” Nojiko quickly stood and put a hand on her sister’s arm, trying to discourage her. Nojiko knew that Nami wouldn’t go so far as to stab Genzo, but it hurt so much to see Nami like this. They had really been backed into a corner here.

“Please, Gen-san...” Nami whispered, looking up at him. She looked too much like that frightened, desperate child from eight years ago right then.

“Gen-san...” Nojiko whispered quietly. She was trying to hold back her tears for the sake of Nami, but was failing. “Are you...” she sucked in a breath, “Please, Gen-san, don’t do this.”

Genzo sighed. He hated seeing the girls so distraught like this. “Perhaps he won’t kill us...it’ll mean he won’t get his money, and since he took out Gosa, he won’t want to risk getting less. I know this is the last thing you want, Nami, Nojiko...but what choice do we have?”

Ignoring his wounds, he pulled both girls – they were women now – so much like Belle’mere even if they weren’t related by blood, they might as well be – into a tight hug. Nami was shaking, and Nojiko returned a hug of her own.

“Please, don’t do this, Gen-san.” Nami begged, hiding her face in his chest. “*Please.*”

“Belle’mere would have been so proud of you. Both of you. Heh. You’ve made this old man proud too.” Genzo smiled sadly. “You girls both go live your lives, and you don’t ever have to come back here.” Genzo pulled away and placed a hand on Nami’s head and had a hand resting on Nojiko’s uninjured shoulder. “I love you both so much, as if you were my own daughters.”

Both sisters were sobbing now.

Genzo gave a humorless laugh. “I remember your mother, how she joked with me all the time...”

Belle’mere teased him by telling him she loved him, and that she’d pay back any favors “with her body”. She then went on to not discourage her daughters to repeat her favorite teasing jokes.

"It was good times for us, wasn't it?"

Gaara had been silently watching the scene unfold. At Genzo's words, Gaara suddenly remembered a dying Yashamaru lying on a roof under a starry sky. Something in Gaara's chest hurt. He didn't really know how to describe what he was feeling.

"Go with Zoro, don't come back. Karura would want you to live."

"I love you."

"You're going to die..." Gaara finally spoke up. "You-you can't."

Genzo looked over at him questioningly, and Gaara stood up.

Nami didn't know what to think at seeing the saddened expression on Gaara's face. It was surreal to see such an emotion come from him. Honestly, a part of her had thought that he was incapable of the emotion.

"When I...lost the one person who really cared about me...he sacrificed himself too. I didn't have a reason to stay or go back, after – no-one...I had no-one else..."

"I never regretted it because I had Naruto and Zoro-nii and now I have Luffy and the crew. As long as I have them, I don't need a place to return to." Gaara felt tears in his eyes and they started running down his face. "Nami wants a place to return to. She...she needs it. My – Captain is strong and so are my brothers, so you don't have to fight. You can stay here."

Genzo smiled sadly.

"And you shouldn't have to fight. This town's troubles isn't your own." Genzo walked over to Gaara and put a hand on his shoulder. "Thank you, Gaara-kun for your concern, and thank you for protecting us when those Marines came." Genzo looked thoughtful for a moment. "Who was it that you lost, if I may ask?"

"My Uncle Yashamaru..." his brow furrowed. "Why?"

"If the worst does happen, I figure I'll tell him what decent young man you've become." Genzo gave a humorless laugh. "He'd be proud of you, I'm sure."

Gaara stared at the floor and fiddled with his scarf, unsure of how to

reply.

“Don’t talk like that, Gen-san!” Nami tearfully demanded.

“Goodbye, Nami. Nojiko.”

When Genzo opened the door, he stopped at the sight of the rest of the villagers. The others in the hospital ended up following Genzo out.

"It's time...the money has been taken and the Marines aren't coming to help us." Genzo's voice was grim as he spoke.

One of the men reported solemnly, “We saw the Marines outside of Arlong’s base, earlier. The Marines left, and not a single Arlong Pirate was arrested.”

One of the younger men spoke up when he looked at Nami, “I saw that Nojiko-san and Genzo-san had been wounded when they came through town, earlier with that red-hair kid, so I...I went to check out your place, and...I saw what happened to it.”

“We heard about what the Marines did to Nojiko-san and Genzo-san and the treasure,” a woman spoke up, looking at Nami. “You don’t have to fight for us anymore, dear.”

“W-you *knew*?” Nami asked in genuine shock.

“We’ve known all along,” another woman admitted. “You wouldn’t have joined Arlong’s crew unless it was for a really good reason.”

“We didn’t want to put that kind of pressure on you,” someone else said, “You certainly didn’t need it.”

“Don’t worry everyone!” Nami managed the fakest of smiles, albeit shakily. “I still have money to spare!” She was lying, but they didn’t have to know about that. “And... I can just get more treasure if there’s a problem! I’ve got a lot of experience, so...so I can collect it much faster this time!”

“They’re going with Gaara-kun’s crew.” Genzo announced with a sense of finality.

“We *haven’t* decided that!” Nami argued, fiercely turning on Genzo.

“You shouldn’t *have* to fight for us!” the first man spoke. “Arlong’s taken so much from us, and now... we can go out on *our* terms!”

The crowd cheered.

“Yeah!”

“That’s right!”

Various other shouts of agreement were heard throughout the crowd.

A woman named Honocha that Nami knew well pushed her son – the boy who had confronted her earlier over to Nami and Nojiko. Their family were only among the few survivors from Gosa.

“If you’re leaving, please take Chabo with you.”

“But mom!” Chabo loudly protested.

Honocha talked over him, her desperation very clear. “If you drop him off at an island far away from here or even if he becomes a Pirate; it’s a better life than what we’ve got now.”

Chabo’s mother squatted down to his level. “You take care of yourself, okay sweetie?” Honocha and Chabo were both crying. “You listen to the Captain of that crew, understood? I love you so much...”

Honocha and Chabo both hugged, and she placed a kiss on his forehead before they reluctantly released each other.

“Please, take Mavi,” a man said sadly, pushing the six-year-old over to their small group. “I don’t want anything to happen to her...”

“Daddy?”

“I love you, Mavi. Daddy has to go now...”

He turned to Gaara, Nami, and Nojiko and gave a deep bow. “Please, take care of my daughter.”

Giving Mavi one last sad smile, he walked away.

Chabo was the one to hold onto a sobbing and wailing Mavi as she struggled in his grip. “Daddy! Come back! Don’t leave me!”

No...this couldn’t be happening. This *couldn’t* be happening! The villagers had all grabbed what weapons they had on hand; cookware and gardening tools. Those wouldn’t do *anything* to a Fishman besides maybe sting. All of these people... they were marching to their deaths. Maybe Arlong wouldn’t kill them, but he would make them beg for

death.

Nako lit a cigarette and stood outside his clinic. Arlong would make them suffer for their defiance. Any wounds inflicted would be up to the wounded to treat, so, he stayed behind to clean up the aftermath.

"You folks should get going." Nako muttered as he blew a stream of smoke. But nobody moved.

They all had those expressions on their faces...they were willing to die. Gaara placed a hand on his stomach.

"Go with Zoro, don't come back. Karura would want you to live."

"I love you."

Gaara felt empty at the sight. He didn't like remembering that night even though his life had changed for the better.

Nami stared after the departing villagers before she collapsed weakly to her knees, feeling completely drained. She had tears streaming down her face. Slowly, she turned to look at the accursed, hated and utterly *despised* tattoo on her shoulder. "Arlong..." she growled as her hand rested on it before Nami reached for the dagger and began stabbing her shoulder repeatedly, cursing his name with every strike. **"ARLONG! ARLONG! ARLONG!!!"**

"Nami! Nami stop!" Nojiko tried to pull on Nami's arm to prevent her from stabbing herself further, but flinched in pain due to her own injury and was forced to let go.

"Oi, what do you think you're doing?!" Nako demanded, grabbing Nami's arm.

"Let go of me!" Nami demanded, "I'm taking off that bastard's mark!"

"Not by stabbing yourself you aren't!" Nako shot back.

Chabo stared at the display in horror, before he started crying too. Mavi was still crying as she buried her face in Chabo's leg. This wasn't fair! He had lost his dad and his village to those damn Fishmen. He didn't seem to know what to do with himself as he collapsed to the ground too and stared ahead morosely as he watched the adults leave. He took Mavi into his arms, hugging her closely as a way to ground himself and hide her face from the unfolding scene. He didn't want to face the harsh reality that everything was gone. He had no-one left

and nothing to go back to.

And Nami, the one he had hated for so long...he'd had no idea.

Nami didn't really fight against Nojiko as her sister begged for her to stop hurting herself. When Nojiko let go of her, Nami threw the dagger away, and began screaming in all of her rage and despair.

“AAAHHHHHH!! AAHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

Sobs shook her entire form as she hugged herself.

“Who...?” Nojiko started asking before Gaara ran forward to Luffy and the rest of his crew.

“Captain!” Gaara was relieved. “You have to do something, please!”

Luffy felt the anxiety radiating off of Gaara. “Someone took all of Nami's treasure – the stuff she was saving to buy the village and what we gathered with her! And now everyone is going to fight Arlong! They're going to die!” Suddenly nervous, Gaara stared at the ground, looking at the bloody dagger where it had landed at Luffy's feet. Gaara then looked up at Luffy with pleading sea-green eyes. “Please... Captain...can you...can you help them?”

Luffy didn't answer, but he patted Gaara's shoulder and walked over to Nami and squatted down in front of her. She fiercely rubbed at her eyes trying and failing to hide the fact that she was crying.

“Things sound bad.”

That was an understatement if she ever heard one. Nami scoffed half-heartedly. “Everyone — the villagers... they're likely going to die and all you can say is that it sounds *bad*?”

“You want me to fight Arlong?”

“You can't do *anything*!” Nami snapped. “I'm tired of losing people I care about to that bastard! All of you should just *go*! Leave us alone! We've been...” Nami hiccupped, and the tears were flowing once again. “We've been dealing with this on our own **sniff** we don't need you...”

Nami couldn't seem to stop her tears this time. It was amazing that she even had any tears left at this point.

Luffy felt the sadness and anger on Nami, along with her weariness

and desperation. Her words certainly were empty, but the single truth of her words had been her fear of losing someone else to this Arlong guy.

Luffy's smile was gentle; a small one that was also somehow filled with so much seriousness. "Hey now, Nami. Don't you have any faith in the crew of the future Pirate King?"

Nami glanced up at everyone flanking Luffy; Zoro, Sanji, Pudding, Usopp, Naruto, and Gaara. The two Bounty Hunters Johnny and Yosaku awkwardly hung back to the side. But they were here. Those fools had followed her here and were more than willing to fight for her; in spite of everything she had said and done.

They were here, and they weren't going to abandon her.

Maybe...maybe this time they could win.

Nami began crying even harder; feeling guilty for thinking the worst, yet so relieved at the same time. Finally, she nodded. "Please...help me, Luffy."

"*Yosh!*" Luffy placed his hat on Nami's head and shot to his feet. Nami's hand went to the hat that he had called his treasure. He shouted for all to hear as he raised his fists to the sky. "*DAMN RIGHT I WILL!*"

"*YEAH!*"

The Pirates – *her* crewmembers, cheered. Nami didn't want to hope, but yet – dammit, she was crying even more, but for a different reason this time. She had seen what her crewmembers were capable of. They wouldn't lose.

Nojiko didn't want to hope that they could win, because so many had gone up against Arlong at the cost of their lives. But Nami looked so hopeful at that moment and Gaara's expression showed anticipation.

"Can you really win?" she asked, but there was so much more than what Nojiko was asking.

Luffy smirked. "I'm Monkey D. Luffy, the guy who'll be Pirate King! No way we'll lose."

It was a declaration so simple yet so resolute.

Sometimes, pessimism can build up in a person, even as they're hoping to get out of the abysmal situation they found themselves in. Nami looked so hopeful, and Nojiko had a smile on her face that showed anticipation.

"Why are you doing this?" Nako asked, because that pessimistic part of him could only see the loss that came with the fights these fools were headed towards.

"We're heading to the Grand Line," Luffy said with a laugh, "and Nami's an amazing Navigator who wants to draw a map of the world. The Pirate King needs the best. It works out for everyone, ya'know."

Nami smiled. "Of course, Captain."

Luffy glanced at Nami's bloody shoulder. "You should get that taken care of."

"I can do it." Nako said as Nojiko helped Nami stand. He would put his hopes on this ragtag group of Pirates.

Luffy nodded. "Let's go, everyone."

Dark storm clouds slowly formed overhead, sending a particular energy through the air.

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The march to Arlong Park was a silent one – nothing needed to be said. Not really, anyway.

Zoro glanced at Usopp and put a hand on his shoulder. He was a realist in situations like this. Out of all of them, Usopp's fighting experience had only been messing around with the Usopp Pirates; confronting Kuro; and somewhat helping out from the sidelines with Krieg.

"Usopp, listen. These Fishmen are serious. They're gonna try and kill you because there's no loss on their part. *Do not* give them a chance to retaliate. You hit 'em when they're down and you make sure they stay down."

Usopp gulped. The fear in his voice was obvious. "Y-you-you mean... *kill* them?"

Zoro looked to the Captain. "Luffy?"

“This isn’t a game, but I guess you already know that. If you can avoid it, then don’t kill them.” Out of habit, Luffy reached for his hat, but he stopped and his hand went back to his side. “But if you don’t have a choice – if you’re backed into a corner with no way out...then you have permission to kill them.”

Usopp gulped once again. This was a little too real for his taste – maybe – maybe he could hide and run away –

“I’m counting on you, Usopp,” Luffy said, the moment he felt the fear and doubt from Usopp. “I know you can do it.”

Naruto grinned up at him and Usopp could’ve sworn he heard Gaara mutter something about “not getting mutilated by tiny fish teeth”. With their encouragement – Usopp was fired up! They were relying on him!

After borrowing Johnny and Yosaku’s swords, Zoro tied his bandana on his head; Sanji lit a cigarette; Gaara put on his goggles; Naruto drew his sword and kusarigama; Pudding pulled out several knives that were hidden within the ruffles of her skirt. Usopp was shaking as he took out his slingshot, but Luffy had faith in him, so he stood as tall as he could.

It had already started to rain heavily when they reached the park to find it in relative chaos.

The gate was wide open; showing all the villagers – many of whom were severely injured, and a small number of them had been killed. Likely, Arlong would only kill a few to send a message while leaving most of them alive. It was a strange feeling – people felt hopeless but determined at the same time. They were willing to accept their fates.

There was a tall, blue Fishman with a long nose standing over Genzo. The Fishman slowly raised foot above Genzo’s head. He was saying something to the man, but that couldn’t be heard. A sick and twisted pleasure of what he was about to do to the Human lying on the ground washed over Luffy, making him sick to his gut.

“Gaara, make me something I can slingshot from!” Luffy commanded, and Gaara quickly responded by making a large arm of sand. Luffy grabbed onto the limb and ran back the way they had come.

“Gomu-Gomu no... Slingshot!”

Luffy rocketed towards Arlong; who was just bringing his foot down.

Genzo's eyes were clenched shut, waiting for the ending blow. Arlong looked up in time to see a kid in a red vest with his arm stretched out behind him.

Luffy's fist connected with Arlong's jaw, and he went flying several feet where he crashed into the building of his base. The sounds of several more crashes and things breaking could be heard from the inside.

"You--!"

The Fishmen forgot about fighting the villagers and swarmed Luffy – who didn't even pay attention to them as he simply ran towards where Arlong was. Although – he did pause to take notice of the pinwheel in Genzo's hat. That was so cool! He'd ask about it later.

The man blinked up at Luffy in confusion. Before he could say or do anything else, sand wrapped around him and Gaara was carrying him and several of the other villagers away from the battlefield.

Zoro was suddenly standing in front of Hachi, blocking his six-sword attack – who jolted and yelled out, "It's the silver-eyed ghost!"

The Fishmen that hadn't been attacked by Zoro all turned and glared. "He's the one who attacked us?!"

"Take that, Fishman!" Usopp shot a rubber-band – which only caused several of said Fishmen to look at him with odd looks and quirked eyebrows.

Chuu scoffed. "What a pathetic--!"

Something red hit him in the face. Chuu quickly wiped off his face. "Tomato? Why you--!"

He was cut off again when something else hit him – and a rank stench made him gag. That Human *dared* to shoot a *rotten* egg at him?!

"Nyaahh!" Usopp stuck out his tongue and pulled at the skin on his cheek under his eye. "Stupid Fishman! What, can't handle a little egg on your face?"

"I'm gonna kill you *slowly*!" Chuu raged, and Usopp screamed.

Chuu got the attention of two other Fishmen and angrily ordered, "Come with me, *now*! I'm gonna make that Human wish he was dead

by the time we're through him!"

Usopp turned tail and ran, with Chuu and his comrades chasing after him.

Kuroobi charged forward, attempting to deliver a swift kick to Zoro's back, but Sanji was there, easily blocking the strike with a kick of his own. There was a loud cracking sound from the impact between them; and Kuroobi looked somewhat surprised at the mild pain that shot through his leg before his expression turned into a glare.

"You won't win this, Human. My skills are far superior." Kuroobi got into a fighting stance. It was a fluke, that's all it was. "I will demonstrate exactly why you can't win."

"Yadda, yadda, yadda," Sanji drawled as he blew out a plume of smoke. "You gonna stand there yammering about your superiority or are we gonna fight?"

"Very well."

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Gaara didn't even have to be ordered to do so; he quickly moved and began gathering the injured while Nako attended to them. It wasn't long until Nami and Nojiko joined them, helping where they could. Although, Nami was staring at the various fights surrounding them. She understandably looked nervous, but there was also a sense of determination in her expression.

"You little traitor!" Lenard screamed as he ran at her with a nasty limp and his sword drawn. Nami gasped, and she really could have kicked herself for not paying more attention and not having her weapon ready. Sand suddenly surrounded her, and there was a scream as a few spikes went through Lenard – they didn't kill him, but it certainly made him back off.

Gaara stood with his arms crossed and a glare was directed at Lenard, who immediately recoiled at the angry gaze.

"If you come within five-no, *ten* feet of Nami or any of the villagers..." an eerie grin spread across Gaara's face. "I'll kill you."

Several of the Fishmen who could move and fight wisely decided not to take their chances with the sand that was slowly flowing around Nami and the others. It really was a relief to *behind* the sand, and not

be one of the ones threatened.

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Zoro and Hachi's blades clashed, causing sparks to fly.

"How dare you lie to me!" Hachi was indignant, but Zoro didn't really care. His stitches strained from the simple effort of blocking; and he smirked to hide the grimace.

"I didn't lie to you. You just assumed things on your own and I agreed with you." The two Swordsmen clash once more, before separating.

Hachi was measuring him up. "You're obviously injured, Human! I'll show mercy if you surrender, *nyu!*"

Zoro was feeling particularly petty, today. All these Fishmen talking about their supposed superiority was getting old, fast.

"Oh, please." Zoro scoffed. "Enough talk, just fight me already."

Hachi huffed in annoyance and got into position.

Zoro's eyes glinted, "All of those guys were so boring. Kept talking about how better they were than us Humans...gotta say, your collective asses have *got* to get jealous with all the bullshit that comes spewing out."

Hachi got very angry of course. "I'll show you the true strength of a Fishman! I am the great Six Swords Style user, there's *no way* I could lose to a Human!" Pointing one of his swords at Zoro, Hachi declared, "I'm gonna cut you up!"

Zoro got into a defensive position and resisted the urge to roll his eyes as Hachi charged at him, yelling, "*Rokutouryu! Takoashi Kiken!*"

It was interesting, Zoro observed as he crouched down and turned slightly. Hachi's style had a flow to it; one sword went forward while others followed closely behind it on slightly different paths. It would make getting close or finding an opening difficult. But if something had a certain flow; that made it predictable.

This move was all about timing.

Taking a deep breath, Zoro focused. The world around him rippled in blues and grays as he stepped forward into a roll. Dodging under the blades and blocking before they could strike.

Right there...was the opening he was waiting for.

“Tourou Nagashi!”

There a beat of silence as both Swordsmen stood there. Zoro groaned a bit as his wounds protested at his moving. His stitches had apparently come undone seeing how a bright shade of red was seeping through his bandages. Moving around normally was fine, but it seemed that when he was using his Kekkei Genkai to attack, it was straining his body.

Blood spurted from Hachi’s chest, but the Fishman groaned and wouldn’t go down.

“I’m really gonna kill you now!” Hachi snarled, even as he struggled to stand. “You’ve only got three swords! There’s no way you can win against me!”

Zoro didn’t even resist the urge to laugh, coughing a bit as his wound twinged even more with the simple action. “You-you really think that having *more* swords than me guarantees a win? Guess you haven’t gotten passed the upstart brat stage, huh?”

Hachi glowered.

Pointing a sword at Hachi, Zoro coolly stated, “Not even all of your swords combined weighs as much as one of mine. I can’t lose.”

Tiring of this nonsense, Hachi called out, “*Rokutouryu! Takotsubo no Kamae!*”

“Oni Giri!”

“Shinshun Takoage!”

Zoro sent chakra rippling through his blades as Hachi’s swords met his. Putting too much pressure on a sword along with unevenly distributing chakra could cause the iron to erode. From the first time their blades had met, Zoro had been flushing bits of chakra into Hachi’s swords. The combined strength of the two Swordsmen’s strikes would be more than enough to wear the swords down. There was a loud, ear-piercing ring for a split second as Hachi’s swords shattered. It took a brief moment or two for Hachi to comprehend that his swords were broken.

“Do you understand now, Fishman?” Zoro asked, as he wheezed, “My

swords are much heavier than yours, therefore, I can't lose."

Hachi quickly dropped the now useless swords, and widened the distance between them. He glared angrily. Unfortunately for this Human, swords weren't the only way he knew how to fight! Water swelled around Hachi's fists.

"Takoyaki Punch!"

"Again with the water..." Zoro muttered and he quickly dodged – right onto the water in the pool.

Hachi openly gaped at the Human standing *on* the water, and his mouth opened and closed trying to form the words that would properly ask the question of, 'How are you doing that?'

Perhaps, if Zoro wasn't feeling so petty, and so *angry* at the Fishmen – If anyone asked, Zoro would tell them that he was tired of hearing about all that ridiculous superiority bullshit. He'd deny up and down that it was anything else. Maybe if he hadn't identified with Nami and her sister somewhere along the way, this would just be another fight.

Dammit, perhaps he was getting a bit on the sentimental side of things.

Zoro sent waves of chakra into the water as he made the hand signs for the Jutsu, *"Suiton: Suiryudan no Jutsu!"*

Water swirled around Zoro; rising several feet into the air. The dragons that formed roared like a heavy storm and charged at Hachi; who honestly couldn't really react. Everyone else who was observing openly gaped – the Fishmen wondered how a Human could do such a thing – was he secretly part Fishman or something?!

The dragons tore into Hachi like thousands of tiny razor blades, and sent him flying high above the battlefield. He came crashing down into the main building's roof.

At that moment, Arlong was questioning, "Hachi?" while Luffy took advantage of his distraction to punch him.

"How-how could I lose...?" Hachi gasped, unable to move. He was quickly passing out. "That technique...! How?"

Zoro felt wobbly on his feet, but he glared down at Hachi as he removed his bandana. "Next to me, you're nothing."

The villagers all stared at Zoro as he approached, and Gaara was next to him to catch him when he fell.

“How? What?” Sanji was saying eloquently. Who exactly had he teamed up with?! “What the *hell* was *that*?!”

“Are you part Fishman?” one of the villagers seriously asked.

“It’s a long story.” Zoro replied. “I’m gonna sleep now. Wake me up when Luffy wins.”

“Seriously, you’re choosing *now* to sleep?” Sanji muttered.

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Bando, who had been fighting off several Humans and toying with them, smirked when he saw that Naruto was running towards him. While he was surprised at how the ground cracked under the force of Naruto’s jump, he easily caught the boy’s leg and threw him towards one of the pools. It would be amusing to have everyone watch helplessly as he drowned the boy; or killed him by means of water pressure.

He didn’t expect the kid to land *on* the water though.

Bando didn’t want to give the kid time to retaliate, and so dove into the water. Naruto had his sword and kusarigama ready; watching for where Bando might come up. He began running on the water as a moving target, hoping that he could—

A webbed hand shot out of the water, grabbing Naruto’s ankle.

“Ahh!” Naruto flailed, and while he didn’t go under that fast; “clinging” to the water with chakra in his arms and hands, he was forced under. Still, Naruto took in a deep breath of air before he was pulled in.

Bando, as all Fishmen were, was a swimmer that surpassed that of any Human. He smirked at the boy he was dragging down with him.

“Do you see this, kid? Did you really think you could win?” Bando asked, with a laugh in his voice. “There are so many ways I could kill you right now. Such as…” he pulled out a spine from one of many on his skin, a barb that was several inches long. Naruto struggled, but Bando simply stabbed him in the leg that he had hold of, and Naruto covered his mouth to suppress a scream and not lose any air.

Dammit, he couldn't waste what air he had!

"Poisoning, drowning – I could stay down here as long I want!" His smirk became malicious, "Or a personal favorite we have for Humans..."

Bando shot upwards quickly, and Naruto suppressed another scream when it felt like his insides were being crushed.

"*This* is what makes *us* superior to Humans!" Bando said as he shot downwards again. He glanced back at Naruto. "This is what... Arlong?"

Arlong suddenly lunged at him, and Bando felt a sharp pain in his side. Blood started to seep into the water, and then there was a puff of smoke and that kid was glaring at him. Bando grabbed the boy's hand to keep him from pulling out the sword.

"You bastard! How dare you use Arlong's image like that!" Bando inflated and twisted around, and there was a muffled snapping sound. Naruto stared at his now broken sword – the rest of the blade was stuck inside the Fishman.

/ ***"KIT! You have got to get some air! You're going to drown at this rate!"***/ Kyuubi was trying not to panic – he would resort to forcefully taking over if he had to, but that might do more harm than good. It would put too much strain on Naruto's body.

It appeared that the sword wouldn't let Bando fight like he wanted, because he instantly deflated, and blood was seeping out of his wound. "I won't lose to a Human much less a mere child!"

Naruto went through a series of hand signs, and two Water clones appeared. They quickly latched onto Bando, who was far too surprised to react. One clone stabbed him with its kusarigama while another covered his eyes and clung to him like a koala and stabbed him with a kunai; both carefully avoiding the spines. Bando began struggling to get the clones off of him, made difficult because he didn't have his usual flexibility.

Naruto rapidly went through another series of hand signs, and he ignored Kyuubi's warning of, / ***"I really don't think that's a good idea, kit..."*** /

Naruto shot upwards via a somewhat weak but efficient Water Dragon, and he landed on the hard concrete on the surface; going

through a nasty mix of coughing and puking blood.

“Jus’ heal me or kill me, ‘ttebayou...” Naruto muttered miserably to his partner.

At the moment, Kyuubi could only do so much to heal internal damage. It also didn’t help that Naruto was poisoned with pufferfish venom. Kyuubi quickly sent the most chakra towards the biggest threat – the poison; while simultaneously sending a portion of chakra to heal internal injuries. It would be slow going, and it was important that Naruto relax and *not* have adrenaline coursing through him.

There was loud splashing in the water behind Naruto, and he forced himself to stand and scrambled to put as much distance between himself and the angry Fishman as he could. Bando pulled himself out of the water, and he looked hassled and pale. Blood was oozing from his side, and Bando obviously hadn’t been successful in getting the blade out.

“That was an impressive trick, but it’s not one you be able to pull again.” Bando stated coldly. “No Human could ever hope to beat me!”

Naruto barely dodged the punch, stumbling to the side. He cried out when another spine was thrown into his shoulder. His vision was blurry, and honestly, he wanted to just go to sleep. Taking hold of his kusarigama, Naruto spun and stumbled when he turned to face Bando who was charging at him with a large spine in each hand.

Forcing himself to focus, Naruto whirled his blade in a large circle. Slowly, the form of a leopard began to take shape beside him. It didn’t have that ethereal glow and was far too opaque; since Naruto was still learning, but it would have to do.

The moment Bando was close enough, Naruto threw the weighted end at Bando, wrapping the chain around his outstretched hand. He pulled him off balance with a fierce yank as he rotated into an awkward flip. The blade of his kusarigama came down in a glowing arch.

“Hyo no Tsume!”

A glowing blue crescent shape struck Bando in the chest. Naruto didn’t want him to have time to recover from that, so he quickly followed the attack with *Oni Giri*, making sure to apply Wind Chakra to both attacks. Bando fell backwards, and Naruto spun into a kick that struck the Fishman across his temple.

Bando went down and didn't move.

"I won..." Naruto said, holding his kusarigama up. Human, Fishman... it didn't matter who was superior. What mattered was who was left standing in the end. Naruto's eyes rolled into the back of his head and he fell – but Gaara caught him.

"That was really cool, Naruto." Gaara said as he quickly took Naruto off to the side with the other villagers.

"That was pufferfish venom...I don't know what we're going to do..." Nojiko said worriedly, but Gaara shook his head.

"Naruto'll be fine."

Already, he could see the wounds healing; even if at a slow rate. Kyuubi was far too stubborn to let anything happen to Naruto.

Those who heard him sent Gaara skeptical looks. Did the poor boy not know how pufferfish venom worked? He didn't seem too worried at all – was he living in hopeful ignorance? None of them wanted to be the bearer of bad news, so they remained silent.

Nako was next to Naruto, looking him over. He gawked at Naruto's wounds...which were *healing*. The gashes were more obvious than the bruises, but the wounds on his arm and leg where he had been stabbed had a curious red glow to them. There seemed to be some sort of steam was forcing a pussy, purple-colored substance out. His body was forcing the poison out?

Looking at how he was healing, it was like his body was aware of the worst of the wounds and focused on those. He had never heard or seen anything like this in all of his years as a Doctor. Just what was this kid?

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Pudding caught one Fishman's punch easily enough with her palm; and using his own exertion against him, she easily flipped him over her shoulder. The Fishman gasped as he hit the ground; the wind forced out of his lungs. Moving quickly, Pudding drove a heel into his chest and pinned back her bangs, revealing her eye.

Understandably, the Fishman started at her wide-eyed, not moving in his disbelief. "Three-Eye Tribe? *Here?*"

Instead of acknowledging his question, Pudding leaned in close.
“Where’s Nami-chan’s treasure?”

Nothing...he was useless. Pudding kicked the Fishman in the face, and moved on to the next one. She grabbed that one by his collar, and forced him to look at her.

“Where’s Nami-chan’s treasure?”

The Fishman shoved her away. “What’s it to you?”

“You don’t know either? How annoying.” Pudding complained.

When this Fishman lunged at her, she easily flipped over and hooked her heel behind his head and drove his face into the ground. She followed up with kicking his head, as one of many of Zeff’s rules for combat were: ‘if you weren’t going to kill someone; make sure they aren’t going to get back up any time soon.’

Finally, she spotted a flatfish Fishman. He looked much stronger than the others; maybe third time would be the charm. Personally, Pudding would consider ‘3’ to be her lucky number. This Fishman was rushing towards several retreating villagers, and one woman tripped – she fell to the ground and put her hands up in one last effort of defending herself from the staff this Fishman wielded.

Charging forward to put herself in between the two, she unsheathed one of her daggers and blocked the attack.

“Thank you!” the woman gasped, and she quickly pulled herself up to join the rest of the observers.

Soma glared at the Human girl who grinned up at him as she held off his attack. He had to do a double-take – a member of the Three-Eye Tribe was *here*? He had heard about their curious abilities, but wasn’t sure how they worked.

“Coincidentally, I’m working on perfecting a dessert made with flatfish as a primary ingredient.” Pudding’s mouth watered. “I’m gonna enjoy carving you up. Sanji-dear knows a delicious recipe for filet...how nice that there’s enough of you for both of us.”

Soma sweat-dropped. Was this woman serious? But it did get him angry.

“You dare call a superior race *food*?!”

He quickly jumped back, figuring he had the advantage over a Human with nothing more than a knife. He got into a fighting stance when – his eyes widened and he dodged to the side when several smaller knives were thrown at him, only to see that Pudding was right next to him. She swiped upwards with the dagger, narrowly missing him. Soma thrust the butt of the staff at her; and Pudding quickly avoided the blow.

Within seconds, Pudding ran the knife down his forearm, and Soma lost his grip on the staff. Pudding then ran the knife along his tricep, and Soma felt his arm weaken. He only had one working arm now! What had she done?!

“I carved the tendons in your arm quite beautifully, wouldn’t you agree?” Pudding asked, as she raised her blade.

“If you think this is enough to stop me, think again!” Soma furiously snarled. He refused to lose to this Human!

This was completely aggravating! A *Human* had *him* on the defensive? He couldn’t properly grip his staff, but he shoved it into his belt and jumped back as he thrust his working hand outwards; several water droplets formed in the air, and they rained down on Pudding like bullets. She quickly moved to protect her face and torso, and fortunately, she only received several stinging and slightly bloody cuts.

“This is just a preview of a Fishman’s real--!”

Ignoring her injuries – they were more like annoyances – Pudding took out several more throwing knives and threw them at Soma, cutting off his speech. He quickly twisted sideways; using his flatness to his advantage as the knives passed by his front and back.

Pudding wielded a second dagger as she charged at Soma. He swung his staff at her, and Pudding’s knife began to have a curious, pastel pink-blue glow to it and – she cut the staff in half when she used one of her knives to block.

“Wha-?” Soma didn’t allow himself to be distracted too much, as he swung at Pudding with what he had left of the staff, but she ducked low and swiped at his leg – which she gave a very generous slice to.

“Bitch!” he lashed out, managing to kick her in the side before she could properly finish the technique. Though, now his leg was slightly weaker and he couldn’t really put any weight on it.

Pudding let out a pained gasp because she pretty sure that one or more of her ribs were cracked. Growing up with Zeff and the various Chefs who had joined the Baratie, Pudding had learned to take a hit and to hit harder when they trained. This guy's kick, while it did hurt; was nothing. When it came to her training, Zeff preferred she learn how *not* to get hit, but that was hardly ever fun!

Too bad she couldn't mess around right now. Although, she stood up and put a hand to her cheek. Pudding looked at Soma through half-lidded eyes.

"Don't you think you could have hit a little harder?"

Soma balked, and Pudding would have giggled at his dumbfounded expression if it weren't for her ribs. Throwing people off was such fun.

"Hey... It's probably best that we wrap things up, you know? I was taught to not play with my food, after all."

That comment angered him even more, and he ran forward, determined to beat that smug look off of her face. She dared to look down on Fishmen!

"Ne, where's Nami-chan's treasure? It was stolen, and I want to return it to her."

Soma swiped at her. "What makes you think I'll tell you anything?"

Veering to the side, white strings flowed from Soma's forehead and into Pudding's eye. Memories of Marines trying to take Nami's treasure, gunshots, screaming...and Gaara was there, and there was fear of the boy...for some reason. Since it didn't pertain directly to the treasure itself, she didn't get to see what made Soma so afraid.

Emptying the treasure chest and taking all of it; even the stuff in the house...and throwing all of it into the pool right here in Arlong Park to retrieve later...

The strings snapped, and Pudding steadied herself while Soma collapsed to the ground with a confused look on his face.

"You..." Soma slurred as he tried to stand up, but failed. What had she done?! He could tell that *something* was missing, but he had no idea what. There was just an odd gap in his memories that shouldn't have been there.

His words were barely legible as he demanded, “Whadid’ya do ta me?!”

“How lucky!” Pudding fist-pumped, then walked over to Soma.

“Thank you, for the memories, Fishman-san.”

After fully sending Soma off to dreamland with a kick to his face, Pudding sighed and she sheathed her knives in the ruffles of her skirt. At least her tolerance for taking memories had gone up a bit. She collapsed to her knees, and smiled when Sanji was next to her. Sanji’s suit had certainly seen better days.

He gently lifted Pudding up, and carried her over to where the others were standing. She quickly covered her eye once more, and pinned her bangs back in place.

Things would be alright.

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Usopp ran like a madman down the road, narrowly dodging water bullets roughly the size of his fist. One had simply grazed his arm and another his shoulder, and it had felt like sandpaper tearing at his flesh. Another passed dangerously close to his ear.

He dodged another shot, and a crazy idea came to him. He was wearing his goggles and hopefully this would work. Shooting a peppery smoke bomb at the Fishmen, Usopp laughed when he heard them sneezing and cursing. Naruto was most definitely a pranking genius! A little innovation on Usopp’s part had refined the Pepper Pellets into a more compact form with a better casing that made the contents spread much easier than before upon impact.

Reaching a certain point in the road, Usopp took a flying leap. He landed very ungracefully on his stomach, and slid in the dirt. Usopp was so nervous and jumpy he was on his feet in record time. At the moment, he was praying to his dearly departed mother that she would either prevent his death or welcome him in her warm embrace.

Usopp’s eyes widened in fear as he pointed, “Arlong!”

Chuu cursed himself the moment he looked, and questioned just why he would fall for such a stupid, *obvious* ploy. At least he wasn’t the only one to look. The moment they turned away, all three were pelted with several rotten eggs. Of course, that caused all three Fishmen to gag at the horrendous stench.

It was a sight to see people who in an uncomfortable mix of sneezing and gagging.

Outraged, the trio rushed forward, and promptly tripped. There was a springing noise, and all three of them landed disgracefully in a dog pile. Their ankles were tied together with a tangle of wires. Usopp could only smirk at the tripping wire he had rigged up – with a bit of Naruto’s help – on the way here.

Not giving them the chance to recover, Usopp shot all three in the face with hot sauce. This was followed quickly by breaking a large bottle of sake over their heads – and hopefully, Zoro wouldn’t be *too* mad about one of his bottles missing from his personal stash.

“Don’t give them the chance to retaliate,” he had said.

Lighting a match, Usopp set all three Fishmen on fire. The three of them started screaming, and began fighting against each other as they tried rolling and twisting in an effort to put out the flames. Usopp openly cringed when he heard bone snapping, and honestly, he felt guilty.

Taking out his hammer, Usopp started trying to hit them over their heads; but it was like a macabre game of Whack-a-Mole. He managed to hit all three of them, though. They weren’t moving – and Usopp didn’t want to – he couldn’t leave them.

So, after hitting all three over the heads with his hammer several more times, he dragged them over to a nearby pond and shoved them in. Could Fishmen drown? Usopp doubted it, but it was a random question that sprung up in his mind.

After his task was done, Usopp collapsed to the ground with a heavy sigh, relieved. He had won! He couldn’t believe it, but he had won! He probably looked and sounded like a crazy person as he started to laugh.

Deciding to leave the Fishmen there, Usopp quickly made his way back to Arlong Park.

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Kuroobi went for a series of punches, and Sanji quickly responded with a series of rapid kicks. It was somewhat annoying to Kuroobi that his opponent was almost treating this fight casually since he had his hands tucked in his pockets.

When Kuroobi went to deliver a punch, Sanji suddenly dropped to the ground and wrapped his legs around Kuroobi's arm. Before Kuroobi could react; Sanji yanked him forward, over-balancing him.

Twisting on his hands, Sanji called out, "*Cotelette!*" as he delivered a swift kick to Kuroobi's side, followed by *Selle*.

Kuroobi gasped for air, but he wouldn't go down just yet. He quickly jumped away, and Sanji was upright again.

Getting frustrated, Kuroobi lashed out with his ponytail and yanked Sanji off of his feet. Kuroobi slammed Sanji onto the ground, stunning him. He turned to dive into the pool; but several sand tendrils shot out at him. He glanced over and inwardly flinched at the death glare being sent his way by a mere child. Kuroobi cursed himself for even hesitating; *why* did he even hesitate?

Taking advantage of his distraction; Gaara wrapped sand around Sanji and tore through Kuroobi's hair. Sand formed under Sanji's feet giving him a platform to jump from. Once his head cleared seconds later, Sanji had to admit that glare was intense!

Kuroobi glanced at his terribly frayed ends and then questioned, "Why do you interfere with this fight, boy?"

Gaara cocked his head and blinked. Naruto had Kyuubi to help heal him; but Sanji wasn't so lucky as to have a Biju to take care of any debilitating injuries. "Because you were going to take Sanji underwater, and the fight wouldn't be fair. I couldn't allow that to happen."

Sand tendrils whirled across the ground and over the pool, and Gaara gave Kuroobi a completely flat look and added, "Guess you can't win against a mere Human without pulling him into the water. Not as superior as you'd like us to believe...that's sad."

All of Kuroobi's training and self-control snapped – if only for the briefest of seconds. That *little...!*

Sanji let out an impressed whistle. "The shitty brat's got a point." Giving the ground a few toe-taps, "Although, personally, I try not to burn manta ray when I prepare it."

"Fine." Kuroobi was forced to concede. But it wasn't like he *needed* to be in the water to win.

He rushed forward; pulling at the moisture in the air, “*Gyojin Karate: Wantougiri!*”

Thrusting his arm outward into a violent slicing motion, a water blade clashed with Sanji’s kick. Sanji’s leg stung and Kuroobi’s arm tingled with the force of their blows.

Sanji couldn’t help but smirk. This was getting interesting.

Dropping into a handstand, Sanji thrust his foot out, “*Poitrine Shoot!*”

Kuroobi quickly responded with, “*Ka Ka Kakato Otoshi!*”

Their legs met, and the impact sounded more painful than either of the men felt. Kuroobi quickly pulled himself back, and Sanji unexpectedly twisted into a spinning series of kicks that forced Kuroobi on the defensive. He blocked to defend his head – several kicks met his arm when Sanji unexpectedly switched to the opposite side with his other leg.

“*Poitrine Shoot!*” Lightning fast kicks hit Kuroobi in the chest three times; followed by *Flanchet*; it was a violent stab to his belly. The combination of the two attacks; plus where they had impacted effectively knocked the wind out of Kuroobi.

He wheezed, cursing this Human – and he formed an ‘X’ with his arms and pulled at the water in the air and thrust his arms out and downward. “*Mizu Setsudan Hiji!*”

Sanji dove out of the way, mostly. Kuroobi had managed to cut one of his sleeves and grazed his side.

“I really liked this suit,” Sanji muttered as he took off his now ruined jacket and tossed it to the side.

Kuroobi charged at his opponent, and Sanji swiveled on his heel to deliver a *Gigot* to Kuroobi’s leg. Kuroobi muffled a curse when his knee came out of its socket. He lashed out and drove an elbow into Sanji’s lower back.

Kuroobi quickly moved to snap his knee back into place, while Sanji dropped into a handstand to deliver a kick to Kuroobi’s face while he was distracted. Kuroobi grabbed Sanji’s leg with one hand and yanked backwards, pulling Sanji off-balance. He drove a hand down to deliver a karate-chop to Sanji’s leg, but Sanji quickly blocked the strike with his other leg.

Using that brief few seconds, Sanji was properly on his hands again. But Kuroobi sent a kick into his side, managing to knock some of the air out of him. He kicked Kuroobi in the chest and with an arching kick delivered a strike to Kuroobi's chin. Finally, his leg was free!

Sanji was on his feet, gasping somewhat as his lungs filled with oxygen once again. He didn't get to relax for long, because Kuroobi was rushing him, attempting to clothesline him. Sanji was able to mitigate most of the attack as he let himself get carried with it.

With Kuroobi's arm wrapped around his torso, Sanji took that as an opportunity to deliver a round of *Cotelette* strikes to Kuroobi's side. Kuroobi grabbed Sanji into a crushing hug and slammed him into a pile-drive. Kuroobi began to slowly crush Sanji, and the Chef *really* didn't want to die via a hug.

Remembering that fish couldn't tolerate air in their gills, Sanji bit Kuroobi's neck and blew a rush of air into his gills.

Kuroobi cried out in pain and shoved Sanji off. Kuroobi touched his neck briefly and pulled his bloody hand away.

"You *bit* me?" Kuroobi was incredulous.

Sanji spit out a bloody chunk of flesh. "I prefer the gills cooked."

Kuroobi's eye twitched, and he once again assumed a fighting position. "I tire of this nonsense. This is a move so strong that it can break one hundred tiles." Rushing forward, he drew back a fist and punched Sanji in the stomach, "*Hyakumaigawara Seiken!*"

Sanji felt the power ripple through him – and he was sure that if weren't for his using Haki as a shield, the attack would have been much worse.

Kuroobi was surprised that Sanji was still standing, and before he could carry through another attack, Sanji had grabbed his wrist and yanked him forward. Using Kuroobi as a sort of springboard, Sanji flipped over him and went into one of his favorite combination of kicks, starting with *Collier*, followed quickly by *Epaule*.

Whenever Kuroobi tried to anticipate and block on one side, Sanji was quickly able to swivel on his hands to ensure that his kicks would connect.

Getting frustrated that the Human simply refused to go down, Kuroobi

decided he would use one of the more deadly of his Fishman Karate techniques.

“Senmaigawara Seiken!”

Sanji barely dodged Kuroobi’s fist, and he could see the air ripple as it went passed. The air when Kuroobi finished the punch had a sort of crashing sound like that of waves against the rocks.

Just then, there was a roaring sound that filled the air, and both men had to gape at twin water dragons that sent Hachi flying. Sanji would gawked like a fool right alongside Kuroobi, but he would let himself get distracted.

Before Kuroobi could unleash another move, Sanji quickly carried out the rest of his kicking combo.

“Cotelette, Selle, Poitrine, Gigot, Mouton Shot!”

Kuroobi could barely keep up with the attacks; and it was as if Sanji picked up speed with every brutal kick. Sanji flipped with his final kick so that his foot hooked around Kuroobi’s throat and he was slammed into the ground; cracking it.

Kuroobi could no longer move. He silently cursed the fact that he had lost to a *Human*. Disgraceful.

Sanji kicked his toe on the ground a few times, before lighting a cigarette. He saw that Pudding had won her fight as well, and quickly made his way over to her. Like the gentleman he was, he quickly and gently carried her over to the village Doctor.

“I think some of my ribs are cracked.” Pudding whispered.

“That shitty bastard. How’d that happen?” Sanji asked, because really – Pudding getting hit – while it did anger him – it was difficult to land such a blow on Pudding.

“He managed to get a hit in.” A blush appeared on Pudding’s cheeks as she smiled and admitted, “It was just for fun.”

Sanji rolled his eyes in a “really?” sort of way. He sent her a *look* and Pudding didn’t even have the decency to pretend to act guilty!

“You shouldn’t take such dangerous risks, Pudding-chan.” Sanji berated gently.

“Are you going to punish me?” Pudding asked, not looking at him.

“I could never.”

Pudding would have huffed if it didn’t hurt her ribs.

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It took a moment for Arlong to situate himself. There was a confusing several seconds where he wondered what the heck had happened. He was about to crush some defiant Human’s skull, and then someone else hit him and then he was here; amidst the rubble of his base with a throbbing jaw.

He had been hit hard enough that his teeth came out. Another set grew in easily enough. He heard footsteps, and the form of a person appeared within all the dust and debris.

“Who are you?!” Arlong demanded as he stood up.

“Monkey D. Luffy,” came the simple reply. Luffy cracked his knuckles. “And I’m gonna kick your ass for making Nami cry.”

Arlong scoffed and smirked, standing up to his full, intimidating height. What a joke this was!

“Do you really think a pathetic Human like yourself can — *OOF!*”

Arlong was cut off when Luffy punched him in the gut. Arlong wheezed as the wind was knocked out of him. He coughed and dry heaved, and was quickly realizing that this kid wasn’t messing around – alright then, neither would he.

Luffy wasn’t going to give him a chance to retaliate – standing by in a fight and allowing the opponent to do as they pleased left an opening that could be a loss – either of a life or a limb.

Arlong gave a fierce swipe of his hand, and the air rippled as marble and golf ball-sized drops of water formed. Luffy quickly crossed his arms in an ‘X’ in front of him to protect himself from the projectiles. They tore up the floor and the walls around him, and made his skin sting and burn. Arlong also grabbed a large piece of wall and threw it at Luffy, who simply swung a rubbery limb through it.

Arlong used the brief distraction to grab his sword from a few rooms away, with Luffy not far behind. The moment his hand gripped his

sword, Arlong spun into an attack. Luffy quickly ducked down into a crouching position, and several hairs were shaved off the back of his head.

Before Luffy could counter, Arlong thrust his hand forward, grabbing Luffy's head. Thinking quickly, Luffy tried wrapping his arm several times around Arlong's own. He was hoping to stop Arlong doing whatever it was he was trying to do.

In spite of his mild shock, Arlong smirked, "Goodbye, worthless Human!"

Luffy felt something pulse through him, stunning him. His arm unwound and dropped limply to his side. The sensation made Luffy feel as if he had been spinning nonstop while someone whacked him over the head with a Haki-filled punch. Judging by Arlong's frown, whatever he had tried to do hadn't worked.

"Do you know the difference between you and me?" Arlong asked.

"...nose." Luffy mumbled, trying to pull away.

"No! As a Devil Fruit user, you can't swim!"

Arlong threw Luffy towards one of the pools with a mocking laugh. His laughter cut off when a sandy platform formed under Luffy before he could come into contact with the water. Several spikes shot out towards Arlong, making even approaching the sand impossible.

Gaara wouldn't interfere with Luffy's fight, but he wouldn't let his Captain be killed if he could help it. He glared at Arlong from where he stood. In spite of himself, Arlong took a step back. A part of him was *scared* of a mere Human; another part of him questioned who he should actually be fighting here.

Luffy shook his head, clearing it. Damn, he was starting to lose count of how many times he was thankful for his rubber body. Okay, don't let him come into contact. Arlong may just figure out how much he has to disrupt the water in his body to finally make his rubbery skin burst. The image of a water balloon bursting with blood and brain matter assaulted Luffy's mind. Internally cringing at his own over-reactive imagination, Luffy bounced to his feet.

Gaara's sand retracted once Luffy was a safe distance away from the pool.

Luffy charged at Arlong, ready to deliver a punch; cutting him off from retrieving his sword. Arlong deviated from his route and ducked around Luffy, quickly diving into one of the pools.

“Hey!” Luffy childishly stomped his foot. “What the hell are ya doing?! That’s cheating!”

He couldn’t fight Arlong down there!

“Sharks on Darts!” Arlong suddenly shot out of the water and Luffy twisted to the side. Arlong’s nose tore through his shirt and shoulder. Arlong’s laughter rung through the air as he dove back into the water. Luffy winced at his bloody shoulder, and he rotated his arm to test how well it moved.

There was no way for the Human to fight him! Even if he didn’t have a Devil Fruit, that kid had no chance of winning!

“Sharks on Darts!”

This time, Luffy was ready for him. Luffy managed to grab Arlong, and spun in a circle before throwing him into the building. Arlong grumbled and cursed as he slowly pulled himself out of more rubble yet again. Stupid Human!

Luffy ran into the room and paused, briefly. Torn papers covered the walls, and Luffy picked up a discarded map off of the floor. That was when he noticed it – all the papers and tools. Nami had these same things on Merry. Something in the rubble glinted out of the corner of his eye.

Luffy simply stretched his arm and picked it up. It was a pen; one that had clearly been used a lot. In fact, there was dried blood on it. Looking back at the map in his hand, those little spots...weren’t ink.

“You made her bleed...” Luffy said quietly. When Luffy spoke quietly; that meant there was a seething anger wanting to get out. And Luffy more than happily would unleash that anger upon the one who earned his ire.

Arlong had finally managed to stand. His voice was mocking as he asked, “Oh? Are you upset about that woman? She’s skilled, is she not? Her map drawing skills are to be commended. My Nami is--!”

Arlong was cut off when an enraged Luffy punched him in the gut, and all the air was shoved out of his lungs.

“She doesn’t belong to you!” Luffy declared, because Nami was *his nakama* – and she would be as free as he was – she would draw her map of the world, and she could stop drawing maps whenever she wanted to! “I’m gonna destroy this room!”

Luffy’s leg stretched and tore through the accursed room. Arlong easily broke the desk chair as it was thrown at him; followed by the heavy desk. He had to dodge the large, oak cabinet, though, when it closely followed the desk.

The cabinet crashed into the courtyard, sending papers flying everywhere. Luffy didn’t even bother throwing the shelf at Arlong; he simply threw it out next to the cabinet.

Arlong quickly ran out to retrieve his sword, and thankfully the armory wasn’t that far from Nami’s room.

As Arlong was making his way outside, he was shocked to see what looked to be water dragons sending Hachi flying high into the air. How in the world? Was that Human doing this? How could a Human control water like *that*?

Arlong couldn’t help but stop and stare. Luffy came up behind him and ogled the dragons with sparkling eyes because Zoro was just so *cool*! Getting back on track, Luffy punched Arlong in the face with a *Gomu-Gomu no Pistol*, and his teeth came out. They grew back in within seconds, but that one had really hurt!

Arlong ripped out his own teeth this time, and when Luffy went to punch Arlong again, his hand was caught by the teeth. Arlong made sure to clamp the teeth down, and then ran to where he kept Kiribachi.

“Ow, ow, ow!” Luffy shook his hand as he pried the teeth off.

Arlong’s laugh filled the air as he wielded Kiribachi. He swung downwards at Luffy, cracking the ground.

“Shhhaahahahahaha!”

“Whoa!”

Luffy quickly widened the distance between himself and Arlong. At least, he tried. Arlong was relentless in his charge. He wielded the odd weapon in a series of spins and flips; making his attacks very much like that of an erratic buzz saw.

Luffy closed his eyes and breathed, focusing on Arlong and his weapon. Luffy began to dodge fluidly, and he could feel Arlong's mounting frustration. The more frustrated Arlong got, the more erratic his attacks became. This was pretty tame compared to Touma.

Luffy continued to dodge as he stretched his arm behind him, waiting.

Arlong swung Kiribachi down, hitting and cracking the ground. Luffy stomped onto the pole with a Haki-filled kick. The pole snapped in two, and Arlong looked shocked. At least he still had two teeth on his half of the pole!

Luffy's fist drove into Arlong's chest, "*Gomu-Gomu no Bullet!*"

Arlong was forced back. Luffy grinned as he firmly planted his feet into a steady position and began rapidly twisting his torso as he stretched towards Arlong. Luffy grabbed Arlong by wrapping his arms around the Fishman numerous times, making any chance of him using what was left of Kiribachi near zero. He then lifted him up and began rapidly untwisting as he shouted, "*Gomu-Gomu no...Kazagurama!*"

This was for Pinwheel-Osan! Luffy slammed Arlong through the building with every passing. It didn't matter to Luffy that he was also slamming himself through the structure; his rubber body was the best! Arlong Park's main structure couldn't take much more abuse as it began crumbling to the ground.

Even when Luffy's torso finished untwisting, he used the built-up momentum to spin on one of his feet to slam Arlong into the ground with a sort of pile-driver. Luffy's other foot made a rut in the ground as he forced himself to stop spinning.

Luffy staggered a bit, feeling dizzy. But a quick shake of his head and a few gentle whacks to his temple made the spinning stop.

A thoroughly bruised and beaten Arlong was passed out on the ground, his nose broken.

The villagers stared disbelievingly, that Arlong, the seemingly unbeatable monster – was finally defeated.

Luffy stood on top of what was left of Arlong Park's main structure. He then shouted out for all to hear, "*NAMI! YOU ARE MY NAKAMA!*"

Nami smiled and began crying again, but they were happy tears this time; because she knew that what Luffy meant by *nakama* and what

Arlong meant by that word were two entirely different things.

“Yeah!” Nami agreed, her face almost hurt from her smile. She certainly wouldn’t mind serving under someone like Luffy.

The villagers around her cheered, and she and Nojiko hugged. The sisters ignored their injuries; they were so elated, that they didn’t even care. The two then pulled Gaara into their celebratory hug; and while he didn’t object, he did scowl in resignation. He was thankful that his blush was hidden by his second armor.

From his spot several feet away, Sanji glared somewhat jealously. Lucky little bastard didn’t look like he appreciated the wonderfully providential position that had befallen him. Ah, if only a couple of beautiful ladies would embrace his sore body...

The villagers went from cheering to a strange mix of loud, relieved sobbing and laughing hysterically. But no-one could blame them. For the first time in so long, they were *finally* free.

Luffy stood on top of the building and smiled as well. The sun broke the clouds and shown down on everyone, in oddly perfect timing. He could feel the villagers’ unbridled happiness rippling off of them, and it was a *wonderful* feeling.

Chapter End Notes

Mizu Setsudan Hiji: Water Cutting Elbow

Hyo no Tsume: Leopard’s Claw

Next time: Logue Town

~:An Author’s Rambles:~

"There're rumors about him taking down a group of Marines who tried to arrest him just two weeks ago... but nothing's been confirmed. I really don't think Yosaku and me really stand a chance. I mean, it's just the two of us, and Arlong's got several men upwards of forty or so?" Johnny shook his head. "Plus, Arlong was on Jinbei's old crew, and that guy's a Warlord." The Marines that got killed by Arlong which Johnny mentioned was Commodore Pudding Pudding and his men. Various Arlong Pirates I'm sure would like to brag; one of Nezumi's men overhears their bragging; and tells someone else. The rumor mill goes on until a few Bounty Hunters hear about it while they're at a Marine Base.

Of course, most people would just assume it to be rumors – because if Arlong actually did kill a bunch of Marines, why is he

still a free man??

Arlong is completely misconstruing what Fumiko was saying and selectively heard the bits and pieces that annoyed him. He only hates Humans because he's told to/thinks himself superior. It'd be one thing to hate Humans because he was a slave to one; it's another thing to hate them because of racial superiority.

Zoro solo-running Arlong Park is what happens when he somehow finds himself relating to Nami's situation with her family. He'd deny up-and-down that he cares and would likely talk i.e. irately shout about how he wanted to train or practice his skills or something; and would never admit to what his anger was actually directed towards. Even though everyone would just know. Being an older brother brings out that side of him – and well, it's not a side anyone wants to see if that anger is directed towards them.

Having to change the fights with Luffy and Sanji with the only difference being that neither of them end up in the water...so I had to write new fight scenes. Why do I do this to myself :'(I'll say it now: Pudding sucks at naming things.

My writing Tumblr is [texasbeanwrites-stuffhere](#). I post there sometimes.

If You Encounter a Crazy Girl with a Sword in a Weapons Shop be Sure to Run Away

Chapter Summary

There are celebrations to be had at Cocoyashi Village, and soon enough, the Straw-Hats are on their way. It's a quick stop at Loguetown for some necessary supplies because Zoro and Naruto need new weapons. But they run into someone very unexpected. Tashigi won't let Zoro and the precious sword that he holds go that easily. Sometimes, there are difficult truths that must be faced.

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your support! It's like Gaara collecting teeth for his "art".

I'll be out of town for like a month, so I wanted to get this out before then. And, you get a longer than usual chapter to boot!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously:

So Zoro had trained intensely before making his way to what he could only describe as a "gateway" and since he was terrible at telling stories and giving details, his companions didn't get anything else beyond that, much to Zabuzza's frustration.

Zoro had been in Kiri for a while before he had gotten lost in the desert – the story was cut short for a moment as Zabuzza demanded,

"How the hell did you go from Kiri to the fucking desert?!"

"Kiri moved, dammit!" Zoro defended himself.

"Entire countries don't move, at least not like that!" Zabuzza reigned in his frustration, already figuring out that arguing with Zoro was akin to arguing with a brick wall that was just sentient enough to speak.

Zoro snorted. "Whatever,"

[***]

Zoro 'hmmmed' and walked up to the map and pulled out his own worn map

from his pocket.

"What...?" Zabuza stared at the large map in disbelief, and the others were right behind him. The map depicted an odd mountain in the center, which circled around the world, while things called "Calm Belts" whatever those were, circled the world as well. Located within one of the Belts way beyond a place called Fishman Island and various other islands with strange names was the Elemental Nations.

(Zabuza briefly wondered if these Fishmen looked like Kisame did)

In fact, the Elemental Nations was much bigger than it had been depicted on their own "world" maps. Countries that bordered the Elemental Nations had been practically cut in half. What was beyond the borders?

Zoro's voice interrupted Zabuza's thoughts. "That's where I came in," Zoro said, pointing to a small island on the larger map. A circle was scrawled next to it with a number. The number next to the small island indicated that it led to Kiri – and Zabuza's eyes widened when he saw another number next to a point in Kiri that led to... a point in the Land of Wind.

Zoro had been in Kiri for a while before he had gotten lost in the desert .

He had claimed that Kiri had moved... until now, Zabuza had just assumed that Zoro was an idiot who somehow managed to get drastically lost. Well, admittedly he still was, but not to the extent Zabuza had been tempted to think at times.

The stories claimed that Kūhaku were ghosts that could appear out of nowhere... if these 'access points' were spread throughout the Elemental Nations, then that explained quite a few of the legends surrounding them. But that didn't really explain why Zoro got lost in the first place, because from what Zabuza could gather, ending up in Suna the first time hadn't been part of the plan in any way.

Upon further investigation of the map, it looked as if the 'gates' or whatever they were called had apparently been broken at some point because they were crossed out.

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The villagers went from cheering to a strange mix of loud, relieved sobbing and laughing hysterically. But no-one could blame them. For the first time in so long, they were finally free.

Luffy stood on top of the building and smiled as well. The sun broke the

clouds and shown down on everyone, in oddly perfect timing. He could feel the villagers' unbridled happiness rippling off of them, and it was a wonderful feeling.

[****]

Doctor Nako's clinic hadn't ever been so full. He had people sorted by severity of injury, and when he got to Zoro, the Doctor couldn't help but be irate as he yelled.

"Why *the hell* weren't you *with* the *first* group of people?! Do you *even* realize how *bad* this injury *actually is*?!" the poor Doctor looked ready to blow a gasket. "*How* are you even moving with *this*? You *actually* fought with *this* injury just hours *after* getting it?! Are you *insane*?! You *cannot* think that simply *sleeping* for a few hours will heal something like this! Don't roll your eyes at me!"

Attempts to calm Nako down only seemed to frustrate him more. He just couldn't seem to wrap his head around the fact that Zoro actually thought fighting with an injury like his was fine – and his patient being so cavalier about it made things that much more maddening.

It didn't help that Luffy was being casual about his injuries as well. Luffy rotated his injured arm – and only winced slightly, and therefore being able to move it without much trouble meant it was fine.

"I have *never* in *all* my years of treating patients have I met a group of people who took so little a concern for their wellbeing!"

"We're gonna be fine," Luffy insisted. "So, when can we leave?"

Doctor Nako crossed his arms and glowered. "Three days."

"What? *Three* days?!" Luffy's expression rivaled that of a kicked puppy's.

"I mean it." Doctor Nako had a growl in his voice; his irritation shoved any sympathy he might have had out the door, locked it, threw away the key, and then barricaded said door for safe measure. "Any more complaints from you and I'll make it five days. Your Swordsman needs time to recover and that girl," Nako waved a hand at a sheepish Pudding, "has two broken ribs and another two that are cracked."

"I wouldn't mind being your patient for a bit longer, Doctor Nako. Who knows what else of me might need some...*closer* examination?"

Pudding winked and blew a kiss, and Nako scoffed in response.

“Don’t worry, Luffy,” Sanji assured his Captain, “I’ll cook plenty of food for you.”

“YAY!” Luffy cheered.

“Stop moving!”

“Can I go now?” Naruto’s voice asked above the din. “I feel fine, ttebayou.”

“No. You were subjected to *two* doses of pufferfish venom. You need to stay for observation for at least another day.”

Naruto stuck out his tongue and pouted.

“If Naruto dies, I get to keep his body. You won’t have to worry about funeral rights that way.” Gaara stated. “Your bones would go perfectly with my collection.”

“I’m not gonna die!” Naruto shouted. “Hey, Doc-Ossan, tell Gaara I ain’t gonna die!”

Nako was at the end of his rope.

“Alright, all of you!” Nami shouted, “You’re gonna listen to Doctor Nako, and do what he says! We’ll take care of our injuries, then leave in three days, and that’s final!”

“Aw, man...” Luffy pouted.

“Nami-swan is so beautiful when she’s angry.” Sanji sighed fondly.

Nami’s eye twitched when she overheard Naruto complaining to the others.

“She’s so bossy, I’m surprised she didn’t tie us up and hit us, ttebayou...”

“I didn’t know you were into that sort of thing, Nami-chan!” Pudding exclaimed, looking very happy about that bit of information.

“I’m *not*! Stop telling people that!”

Nami gave Naruto a smack on the head; not too hard, but it was enough to make Naruto give the others a ‘see’ expression.

Even though Nami rolled her eyes, she still smiled. These people...*her* crew...they were impossible. Nami found that she didn't really mind at all. Not that much, anyway.

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Commodore Snuzu stared at the gathered Fishmen; then at Zoro who looked entirely bored. Should a guy with all those bandages really be standing? Those two Bounty Hunters, Johnny and Yosaku, was it...? Who was who again? Did it matter?

Snuzu leaned to the side, glancing behind the teen. Luffy was here, too...eating and laughing with the crowd of villagers. Strange. Or at least, he thought that *maybe* he should consider the situation strange. He had heard Garp was worried about his grandson – so...maybe he should say something?

Anyway.

No sign of that red-haired girl, or that raven-haired kid with the creepy eyes. Wasn't Zoro partners with those two?

Oh, well. It was too tiring and far too troublesome to think about. He yawned.

It seemed that there was another story here.

Arlong had been ruling over this island for the past eight years...and Belle'mere had been killed by him. Upon hearing that, Snuzu suddenly straightened, and his shoulders were back. His hands were behind his back, and anyone who saw Snuzu as the man who had rightfully earned his rank would be worried.

"You killed Belle'mere, did you?" there was a dangerous edge to the Commodore's voice.

Arlong glared, but he still smirked. It looked painful for him to even speak. "Oh? Did I kill a worthless Human that you cared about?"

Snuzu didn't rise to the bait.

"There's a rat-captain who was working with Arlong and allowed him to get away with this." Zoro said from somewhere to Snuzu's left.

"Captain Nezumi?" Snuzu said, raising a brow. He wasn't exactly surprised, but at the same time, Nezumi had always been a little...

sleazy. Snuzu had never liked the man.

Snuzu yawned, but didn't slouch like he usually did. "There's talk of one Commodore Pudding Pudding and his men disappearing in this area...would any of you be aware of what happened to them?"

Arlong didn't seem to care, since he was being locked up anyway. Shoving the violent deaths of Humans in the faces of the ones who cared about them could be elating. "We sunk his ship and they all drowned."

Snuzu's leg struck Arlong's face in an unexpectedly fast kick. Arlong groaned painfully. The other Fishmen wisely chose to remain silent in their hateful glares.

"Get them back to the ship, and we'll take care of the reward."

Snuzu and his assistant approached the villagers, knowing that there was shame involved. They all stopped what they were doing in setting up for the upcoming party – and Snuzu gave a bow to the villagers – apologies were necessary. The Marines had failed these people.

"Chichichi."

Well, speak of the devil...

Captain Nezumi approached the villagers with his men. They had come in and hadn't yet noticed Snuzu. Nezumi clearly had been on the losing end of a fight, and his arm was in cast. His men looked like they had seen better days, too.

Who or what had done *that* to them?

"What a lucky day indeed, who knew those disgusting Fishmen would have been defeated by a group of passing Pirates?"

Snuzu noticed the glare Gaara sent Nezumi's way. If killing someone by simply glaring at them was possible, this kid would have done it ten times over. Was Nezumi actually...having his men point their guns at the villagers?!

"So, all of that treasure, and Arlong's bounty, it belongs to me, now. You are going to get it for me."

"Um. Sir," one of his men spoke up, but Nezumi continued, ignoring his subordinate.

“You can’t keep treasure that was gathered through illegal means, after all...and harboring Pirates? I don’t think you want your list of crimes to pile up, now do you? I’m being quite gracious here, you know.”

Nezumi failed to notice his men looking nervous. Snuzu slowly yawned, and several bubbles floated out of his nose; and drifted over Nezumi’s men. When the bubbles popped, Nezumi finally glanced behind him to see what was going on. All of his men had dropped to the ground and were sleeping; with snot bubbles coming out of their noses.

“Hey!” Nezumi started, but then he realized *who* exactly had this ability. Nezumi turned around in time to get a fist delivered to his jaw. He fell to the ground and whimpered up at the Commodore.

The villagers and Pirates all stared in awe at how fast Snuzu had moved just then.

Snuzu looked furious. “Eight years, Nezumi. *Eight years*. You are responsible for their suffering, and you *will* pay for it. Get your worthless hide to my ship, *now*. You’ll be lucky if you’re not in Impel Down after this! Be thankful I don’t stuff you into a cell with one of Arlong’s men!”

Nezumi whimpered even more – and dammit, seeing Snuzu – who always moved so slowly and seemed to put no effort into anything and drawled more than he actually spoke – was terrifying. A wet spot formed on the rat-Captain’s pants, and Snuzu only seemed to get angrier at Nezumi’s lack of response.

“Why are you just sitting there?” Snuzu demanded, and he waved an arm. “Get going! If you try to run I’ll break your legs and drag you back to Headquarters *very literally!*”

Nezumi squeaked when Snuzu’s assistant Oki, grabbed Nezumi’s arm and hauled him to his feet.

“March,” was her simple demand.

Nezumi wanted to argue, but didn’t dare.

“Tell the others to come here and carry these men as well.” Snuzu ordered, and his assistant saluted. Once that was done, Snuzu’s shoulders slouched and he was back to his usual, lazy-looking self. Turning back to the villagers, Snuzu bowed once again, and said, “I

know that it doesn't mean much, but I apologize for the actions of my subordinate. This shouldn't have happened, and it really was an oversight on our part."

"Thank for apologizing..." Genzo said slowly, not really sure how to respond. Snuzu wasn't like any of the Marines he had dealt with in the past. Really, if it hadn't been for Belle'mere and now Snuzu – Genzo's opinion of the Marines would have been more than critical. "Knowing that we can at least have justice for Belle'mere and for our villages... that's a comfort."

Snuzu nodded. "I'll have some people come and help with any repairs."

Everyone looked shocked at that, and Snuzu yawned and sighed. There would be so much paperwork involved with this whole thing. The thought made him want to sleep.

His attention went to Luffy, who was laughing about something, and Snuzu excused himself before approaching the boy.

"Monkey D. Luffy." Snuzu said, getting his attention. Luffy immediately straightened as he looked up at Snuzu, but he held a stance like that of an animal ready to spring and run. "I know your grandfather," and the way Luffy stiffened and looked somewhat worried – Snuzu exhaled heavily. He'd much rather sleep than get involved with familial drama; especially that of the Monkey family. "He's worried about you, so make sure you write or call, alright?"

Luffy looked far too relieved that Snuzu wasn't dragging him back to Garp. He simply nodded and muttered something about promising that he would.

Snuzu stuffed his hands in his pockets, gave one last bow, and left.

"What was that about?" Sanji asked, as he pulled a cigarette from its pack.

"I..." Luffy started, but then said somewhat lamely, "I *may* have kinda sorta ran away from home...and my grandpa to become a Pirate."

"Okay..." Usopp said. "I know some of us are an exception, but don't most people?"

"Grandpa doesn't want me to be a Pirate." Luffy said with a shrug. "He wants me to be a Marine, but that's so boring!"

“You’d make a terrible Marine.” Zoro said with a cheeky grin, “Way too many problems with authority. You’d get in trouble for insubordination in your first week.”

“Zoro’s right!” Luffy agreed with a laugh.

In Luffy’s mind, though – he *knew* he’d have to talk to his grandfather at *some* point, and it wasn’t a conversation he was looking forward to. Oh, well.

“I’ll leave today’s problems to tomorrow’s me.” Luffy muttered to himself before turning his attention on Sanji and Pudding who were already gathering ingredients for a huge feast.

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That evening, there was much celebration to be had – even some mourning as well, but it was a bittersweet thing. It seemed that cuts and bruises wouldn’t keep the Pirates from enjoying the festivities (much to the annoyance of Doctor Nako). The musicians were already playing; and the islanders had gathered their food – with Sanji and Pudding working together to make a celebratory feast.

Naruto sat on a rock by himself; far away from everyone else, staring at his broken sword. It had truly been his precious treasure – the first gift Zoro had given him. He had been so careful with it; always cleaning it and doing his best to maintain the blade – and it had still broken.

“Hey, brat,”

Zoro’s voice startled Naruto, and he quickly sheathed the broken blade to hide it. Zoro sat down next to Naruto, and took a swig of alcohol. Naruto said nothing as he looked at the sword in his hands with a solemn expression.

Raising a brow, Zoro asked, “What’s wrong?”

Naruto slowly pulled out the sword. “I’m sorry, Zoro-nii...I broke the sword with that blowfish guy...”

Some part of Naruto was scared that Zoro would be angry that he had allowed the sword to be broken – even irrational as it was. It had been his responsibility, and now... Distant memories of him getting in trouble for something getting broken when it had been in his care and even when it hadn’t...a slap to the face...

Zoro raised his hand, and Naruto ducked his head, expecting a strike – but Zoro ruffled his hair. “That blade served you well.”

Naruto glanced up at Zoro, a small smile was on his face. “Don’t feel too bad on it, I’ve broken more than my fair share of blades.”

“But...but *you* gave me *this* sword, Zoro-nii, ‘ttebayou...” Naruto sniffed and wiped his face with his sleeve, trying not to cry.

Oh...that’s what this was about...at least, Zoro thought he understood. “It was a good blade for the purposes it served, but not the strongest. I traded a pair of old blades for it. The only reason that sword lasted as long as it did was because you took such good care of it. In anyone else’s hands, it would’ve broken a long time ago.”

“Really?” Naruto smiled, somewhat.

“Yep. Now, you’ve gotta give such a loyal blade a proper funeral.”

“How?”

“There’s a graveyard over there,” Zoro indicated a direction, “So we’ll leave our blades there.”

Naruto was the one to ask for directions – even though Zoro didn’t think they needed to. He *had* been through the graveyard earlier that day. Four times, in fact.

The graveyard overlooked the ocean, facing east. Sitting near the cliff’s edge, Zoro and Naruto both stuck their broken blades into the dirt.

“Fold your hands like this, and thank your blade for serving you.” Zoro instructed, “For protecting you, and all that.”

Naruto clapped his hands twice then put them together, and bowed forward. He thought about the first time Zoro had given him this sword. It was the first time anyone had given Naruto something that was truly *his*.

“Thank you for allowing me to use you,” Naruto whispered to his former sword, “it was fun.”

Once Zoro was done thanking his blades as well, the two made their way back to the town.

Genzo sighed heavily. Exhaustion, stiffness in his neck, back, and injuries, and utter relief. It made him feel old. Laughter and music surrounded him; sounds that hadn't been present in Cocoyashi for eight years.

Mavi was dancing around her father, and he clapped along to the music from where he sat with a leg in a cast. Chabo was smiling wide as he sat with his mother and several other friends – though, a few of their friends weren't present, as they had been killed and then buried earlier that day.

Today was just as much a memorial for the fallen as it was a celebration for their victory.

He had two bottles of sake with him as he made his way towards Belle'mere's grave.

When Genzo came upon the grave – an odd, egg-shaped thing the size of his fist was at its base. He sat down and inspected it. It was a pearly-white. While it was intricately carved, it was weird. It was like an egg-shaped orange? What was probably supposed to be the leaf looked more like a curly feather. Genzo put the thing back down, and took out the pinwheel from his hat and stuck it into the soil.

Opening both bottles of sake, Genzo slowly poured one on the grave and gently placed the bottle down at the cross's base once it was empty. Then, he started drinking the other one.

"You wouldn't believe it, Belle'mere...but we made it." Genzo took in a heavy sigh, and sniffed. "I haven't seen Nami smile – *truly* smile, since you..." he took a drink. "Those ragtag bunch of kids...you would've liked them."

For a while, Genzo sat in silence, listening to the music and joyful shouting off in the distance. He heard movement behind him, but didn't bother to turn around.

"Huh, what's this...?" a voice said, and Genzo turned to see Luffy, who had a piece of meat in each hand. "Oh, Pinwheel-ossan!"

"It's you..." Genzo waved Luffy over.

"A grave? Whose is it?" Luffy asked as he sat down next to Genzo.

"Nami and Nojiko's mother, Belle'mere."

Luffy hummed and gave a respectful bow to the simple wooden cross. He smiled, and pointed at the weird, orange-egg thing. “Looks like Gaara dropped this off.”

“Oh?” Genzo wondered at the odd boy, and he was curious. Curious about where the kid had come from and about his uncle. “His art skill are...interesting, to say the least.”

“Hm, he made this,” Luffy indicated a leather bracelet on his wrist that had silvery-white and gray beads and a few tiny pink feathers.

“Listen, Luffy...” Genzo was very serious, and sake had given him some decent liquid courage. “Nami’s happy, being with you guys. But understand something; if you ever take away her smile, I’ll kill you myself.”

Honestly, threatening the guy who was strong enough to beat the guy who had kicked *his* ass probably wasn’t one of Genzo’s better ideas. But Luffy looked at him, blinked a few times, and then laughed. It wasn’t mocking or cruel in any way. It was a mirthful sound.

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” Luffy promised, “Nami is *nakama*.”

It was truly a relief to hear that. Plus, Luffy put so much weight into how he said the word that Genzo honestly wondered if he should be worried about anyone who threatened Luffy’s *nakama*. Things would be okay.

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Nami was making her way around the village, finding members of her crew – Zoro was out-drinking everyone; Sanji was still preparing mountains of food; Gaara was making art for the villagers from the rubble of Arlong Park and out of that Pearl guy’s armor; Naruto was with Usopp – Usopp was telling some tall tale about impossible feats and Naruto was transforming into the various characters of the stories, much to the entertainment of the observers.

Pudding was serving delectable-looking desserts when Nami approached her.

“Hey, Pudding.” Nami greeted. “I just wanted to thank you, you know, for fighting for all of us and finding the treasure.”

“Of course!” Pudding responded with a smile as she gracefully handed Nami a delectable-looking dessert. “What are love-rivals for?”

Not expecting that response, all Nami could say was, “Eh?”

Pudding winked at her, “I couldn’t very well show the men which of us is the better woman without my competition, right?”

“C-competition? *What* competition?”

“For the hearts of the men, silly!” Pudding expertly balanced the tray on one hand as she clenched her other hand into a fist looking dreamy-eyed. “The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach – but, I’m already way ahead of you with my recipes made with my upmost passionate love.”

“Uh...okay?”

“You only said those mean things as a way to establish your position and role, but you’re really going to have to step up your game. A cute smile is only going to get you so far as a *hinedere*, though you aren’t a very good one.”

“Wha...” Recalling what she had said earlier, Nami openly cringed, “I’m sorry for what I said...But really, I’m not competing with you.”

“No need to apologize, Nami-chan. Love and jealousy makes us do and say things we don’t always mean.” Pudding gave Nami a scrutinizing look. “Don’t think I’ll let my guard down any time soon, love-rival!”

Seriously?! Nami groaned, reluctantly accepting that Pudding thought that they were competing or whatever. And what was with that ‘*dere*’ nonsense?

“Out of curiosity,” Nami turned back to Pudding and pointed at her own forehead as she asked, “How did you do that er, stringy thing with your eye?”

“I’ve been able to do it since I was a child.” Pudding tilted her head, “I was around eight when I discovered it by accident...”

“By *accident*? Wait. So it’s *not* a Devil Fruit? How is that possible?!”

“Nope!” Pudding grinned. “I could never eat a Devil Fruit. It’s just a super special power, I guess.”

“Well, you’re from the Three-Eye Tribe, right? Can they do the same thing?”

Pudding’s smile fell. “I don’t know...I mean...”

Noticing Pudding's discomfort, Nami quickly changed the subject, "Well, with the treasure and what we got for Arlong's bounty, our villages can finally begin to rebuild. And with the Marine's help, too! So when we eventually make our way back here, just *imagine* what it'll look like!"

More than thankful for the subject change, awkwardly as it was done, Pudding agreed. "I'm sure it will be beautiful, Nami-chan."

Luffy patted his belly contentedly. He'd wait just a bit longer for his food to settle before he started eating some dessert. Luffy approached Zoro, who had several sake bottles around him, and he still didn't look drunk. But the other partygoers were already passed out around him.

Zoro greeted Luffy with a nod, and Luffy sat next to him.

"Your fight was pretty cool, today." Luffy said after a moment. "I wish I could've seen all of it!"

"The way you beat Arlong was pretty impressive." Zoro laughed as he added, "Imagine being taken out by an attack with 'pinwheel' in the name!"

"I guess." Luffy shrugged. "But you know, your attacks weren't that smooth."

"Hmm?" Feeling insulted Zoro sat up straighter, he slightly slurred as he asked, "What'dya mean? My swordsmanship was fine."

"Oh, I'm not talking about the swords. I don't know anything about that," Luffy shrugged. "I'm talking about that 'ghosting' thing you do sometimes. It's not as smooth as it could be."

Zoro blinked dumbly. "Huh?"

"I *knew* I recognized it...I met someone before, who does that ghosting thing."

Zoro now was really paying attention to what Luffy was saying. "You met a Kūhaku?"

"Oh, is that what you're called? That's not the name he used. You wouldn't happen to know someone named Touma, would you?"

"I've never met anyone else like me...I was an orphan." Zoro said, "The Kūhaku – the Clan that I'm from, have a long history. I'll tell you

sometime.”

“Aww...” Luffy muttered in disappointment. “I wanna hear it *now*, though.”

“Don’t feel like it...so...Touma? What’s he like?”

“Oh, he’s awesome! You really remind me of him.” Luffy said with a laugh. “He has silver eyes, just like you do.”

So...there were Kūhaku in East Blue? Well, it shouldn’t really be surprising, considering how many there had been before they had left the Elemental Nations.

[...]

***Flashback: East Blue; Dawn Island, Seven Years Ago ***

...

“What’re you two kids doin’?”

“Running away!” Luffy said cheerfully.

“From what?” the man asked, likely not concerned because of Luffy’s too-upbeat attitude.

Just then, the Mountain Lord burst out of the trees with a furious snarl, causing the man’s jaw to drop and his eyes to widen.

“From that!” Ace shouted, getting ready to grab Luffy and run – and if the poor bastard got caught, then he’d be a distraction so that they could get away.

That was when something happened: the stranger grabbed both boys; the world seemed to slide around them as they stood still, and just like that; they were several feet away from where they had been.

The Mountain Lord tore up grass and earth with its sharp claws as it charged at the three Humans. Ace and Luffy could only stare in awe at the man and whatever that weird trick had been. The stranger was standing in front of them with a protective stance; rapier drawn. The Mountain Lord let out a roar.

The man flicked the rapier around in the air in front of him several times before he crouched slightly and pushed one foot back. The air around him began to change; thin, silvery-white trails of energy

circled around him forming a ball-shape. Then – he vanished.

The Mountain Lord leapt into the air, teeth and claws drawn. Suddenly, bursts of those silvery-white trails shot out of the tiger – as if it were being cut from the inside out. The Mountain Lord then split apart into several finely cut pieces; all of which fell to the ground a few feet from Luffy and Ace.

The stranger stood several feet away, behind the Lord. He flicked his rapier, then sheathed it, all in one smooth motion.

Ace slowly got up and looked at the pieces.

“There’s no blood...” somehow, it had been cut so cleanly that the bothersome floor rug hadn’t even bled.

“That was amazing!” Luffy beamed as he clung to the man’s leg. *“You did that disappearing trick and that sword was all, whoooosh, whoosh, slash!”*

“Yeah, yeah...it was awesome,” the stranger said, clearly only trying to appease Luffy and loosen his grip around him. Which was difficult, considering Luffy had wrapped his arms around him several times. The man sighed, and shifted his weight – and within seconds he was standing next to Luffy, free of his limbs.

“Was that...” Ace stared. *“Who the hell are you? Is that ability from a Devil Fruit like Luffy?”*

“No-one in partic’lar.” The man frowned for a moment. *“I couldn’t eat a Devil Fruit. Anyway, you two alright?”*

“Yeah!” Luffy was beaming up at him. *“That was the coolest thing ever! I can’t wait to tell Dadan and the others about you!”*

“Okay. Where are we?” the man asked as he glanced around. *“I was in the forest, bu’tings look so different for some reason...these kinds of trees aren’t s’ppose to be here...”*

“Um, Mt. Columbo.” Ace answered.

“What? Where’s that?”

“East Blue...Dawn Island... Goa Kingdom...” Ace answered slowly, as if the man were a simpleton. With every reveal of their location that Ace gave, the stranger’s expression clearly was becoming more and more

confused.

“But that donnit make sense! I was on Bargontho Island in the Grand Line...” the stranger paused for a moment as he frowned thoughtfully again. *“How’d I end up here?”*

“What, did you get lost?” Ace asked incredulously. *“How is that even possible?!”*

The man scowled – well, sort of pouted. *“I donnit get lost.”* He muttered darkly, *“Not’that much, anyway...”*

He looked around for a bit then asked, *“Is there a Den-Den Mushi I can use?”*

“In town there is.” Ace replied.

He helped them gather up their kill, and they made their way towards Goa – with an excitedly chattering Luffy clinging to the man the entire time.

They stopped outside the wall that separated Goa from the plebeians of the island, and the man nodded. *“I’ll be right back.”*

With that, he simply vanished from sight. Ace and Luffy’s jaws dropped. Luffy looked ready to hyperventilate from excitement.

“I can’t believe we’re actually waiting for him...” Ace griped.

“He’s so cool...!” At least Luffy was happy.

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The man would have used a payphone, but he didn’t want to risk someone listening in on his conversation. The best place to make a phone call in circumstances such as this was a place that no-one would be able to listen in. Glancing up at the mansions; seriously, did people really need to live in such oversized houses?

Focusing on a particular house, he closed his eyes for a moment then opened them. The world was blue and gray, and his senses reached out. No-one was in this part of the house, and at this time of night the servants were asleep. There were guards, but none of them would be expecting someone to walk in without even using the door or even a window.

Stepping forward, he was now inside the mansion. Finding a study,

and a Den-Den Mushi was fairly easy – but dammit, the doors kept switching around! This place had some pretty serious security...he began focusing his chakra, linking it to the wall and doorways around him to mark where he had been.

Finally, he found what he was looking for.

Dialing the desired number, the man leaned on the table as he waited. Two rings, and a somewhat wary, “Hello?” answered.

“Uh, it’s me...Touma...”

“Touma?! Where the hell are you? You suddenly up and disappeared from Bargontho, and Karasu and Betty are freaking out! What happened?!”

“I...I actu’lly have no idea...” Touma admitted. *“I was walkin’ through the forest when I found myself in a place in East Blue—”*

“EAST BLUE!!” the incredulous voice screeched.

“OI! Not so loud, dumbass! I’m in someone’s house!” Touma shouted back, and he slapped his forehead when he realized he had just done the thing he’d been admonishing someone else for. He listened, but couldn’t hear anyone coming to inspect the noise. Touma used Observation to stay alert and so he could listen to the person on the other side of the call.

“How are you in East Blue?! Where in East Blue?”

“Uh...Dawn Island, Goa Kingdom.”

“Well, shit.”

“Look, it’s no’that bigga deal. I’ll just make my way there. I’ll hitch a ride —”

“NO!” the other person shouted. In fact, it sounded like more than *one* voice had protested his suggestion.

“Let’s put it like this: Dragon-sama trusts you with money; he trusts you to finish any given task; he trusts you with his life. But the *one* thing he *absolutely* won’t trust you on is to capably find your way back to base.”

Touma scowled and narrowed his eyes. *“I donnit get loss’tthat bad...”*

“You are literally on the other side of the Grand Line in East Blue!” Dragon’s voice shouted from somewhere in the background. The snail’s face looked entirely incensed.

Touma cringed at the volume, and still no-one came, thank the gods.

“Listen,” the Den-Den Mushi’s face morphed to that of Dragon’s. “After the incident at Bastille Wolf Port, the Marines are seriously cracking down on security. Pirate ships are a given, but reports say they’re going after merchant and fishing ships. We’ve no choice but to lay low and stay out of East Blue for a while.”

“Eh? How long, Boss?”

“It could be a year-and-a-half, hell, even *two* years before we can risk entering East Blue again. So just...*try* not to get lost. Again. We’ll come to you.”

“...Fine.” Touma conceded. *“I’ll see you.”*

With that, Touma hung up. He easily slipped out of the house with no-one being the wiser. The two boys flinched when he suddenly appeared next to them.

The older of the two scowled in irritation, while the younger’s eyes sparkled enough they could have lit their way back. Touma sighed, knowing that he would be here awhile. He might as well settle down for a bit until he could be picked up.

“Well, I called my boss, and it seems I’m gonna havta wait. I’ll need a place to stay...d’ya know where—“

“You could stay with us!” Luffy offered, much to Ace’s aggravation. Even though the guy had saved their lives, there was no way Gramps would like this guy anywhere near him and Luffy for long periods of time. That left Dadan... *“I know the perfect place!”*

“Since I’m gonna be stayin’ for a bit, I s’ppose I should prop’ly intraduce myself.” Taking off his mask, silver eyes glinted even in the dull moonlight. *“Kusanagi Touma.”*

“I’m Monkey D. Luffy!”

“Portgas D. Ace.”

Touma’s jaw dropped and his eyes widened. *“Did...did you just say*

Monkey and Portgas?!"

"What's it to you?!" Ace demanded, quickly standing in front of Luffy protectively. He seriously didn't think he could do anything against the guy, but he would make killing them extremely difficult and very unpleasant.

"No, no...just...unesspected s'all..." Touma muttered. *"What're the chances, though...?"*

Ace thought that Touma's muttering was weird. *Everything* about the guy was weird. And his eyes were damn creepy.

They walked in silence most of the way. It seemed that Touma had a habit of drifting off in any random direction on a whim.

"Oi, what the hell?!" Ace finally fumed after the eighth time. *"I swear, you're worse than Luffy at paying attention!"*

"Ha, ha, Ace is right!" Luffy laughed.

"Oi, oi. Your direc'tions were confusin' kid."

Ace scowled. The absolute nerve! *"How did you not wander off when we were walking earlier?"*

Touma shrugged, but he scowled back at Ace. *"I donnit get lost, kid."*

"Says the idiot who got lost!"

By now, they had reached the Mountain Bandits' hideout and well, Dadan was none too happy about having another person there – and she let it be known.

"What is this?! Why are you here?!"

"Just hav'ta stay for a while, Dadan-san, just until my allies are able to come get me, eh hh two years from now. At most." Touma said with a shrug.

"TWO YEARS?!" Dadan screeched, but was ignored as Touma continued easily,

"If yer Bandits, I'll more'n happily steal what'ver you like – within reason." Touma put a hand on his saber, *"I'll also make an acception for killin' someone – if only I have to. I'll make that determ'nation on my own."*

Dadan blinked a few times. *"Oh, well...um, okay."*

Touma smiled. *"Glad we could come to an agreement!"*

As they sat around eating tiger meat, vegetables, and rice, Touma turned his attention to the boys.

"So, Luffy-kun, Ace-kun, if I may ask...whadd'ya wanna do when you grow up?" there was a smirk on his face along with a side of curiosity, *"Marines? Or're you content on stayin' on this island?"*

"Hell, no!" Ace said as if Touma actually suggested he become a Marine. *"I'll be a Pirate, I don't care what Gramps says! And if I find One Piece along the way, that's fine with me!"*

"I'll become the Pirate King!" Luffy declared resolutely, raising a fist nearly to the ceiling.

Touma's smirk widened for a moment before he laughed. *"Such lofty goals you two have! I like it!"*

"I'm gonna set out in a few years, when I'm seventeen." Ace said, *"I've been planning my escape from this place for a long time."*

"Yeah!" Luffy nodded, *"And when I'm seventeen, I'll be leaving, too!"*

"You'll just have to sneak passed Garp..." Magra's expression didn't exactly convey the success of that particular venture.

Touma looked thoughtful. *"You mean Monkey D. Garp?"*

"Yeah, you have the misfortune of knowing him?" Ace asked.

"I know of him." Touma answered. *"What're his grandkids doin' hangin' out with Mountain Bandits, though? No 'ffence."*

"Garp is willing to overlook our extracurricular activities as long as we look after Ace-kun and Luffy-kun." Dogra said with a shrug. *"Along with staying out of certain parts of Goa and away from the Nobles."*

"And if we happen to take care of a few rival gangs, then all the better for him." Dadan said, *"And that old bastard leaves me the hell alone! Hopefully he won't be dropping off any more brats like Ace, here!"*

"Stupid hag..." Ace muttered, making sure Dadan heard it.

"You mean he's here. As in on this island." Touma looked

uncomfortable.

“Well, yeah!” Luffy complained. “He stops in here every few months and tries to convince me ‘n Ace to be Marines! He threw me into a cave! A cave!”

“Listen, if Garp comes here, I’m jus’ ‘nother of your recruits...I really donnit wanna get caught by him.”

Dadan could tell how serious he was. She took a puff of her cigarette. *“How bad?”* When Touma glanced at her, Dandan couldn’t help but feel unnerved by his silver eyes. *“Like, is this getting a slap on the wrist bad, or arrested and thrown into Impel Down, bad?”*

“Either Impel Down or public execution.”

Dadan massaged her temple. *“If you get caught, I’m not gonna vouch for you.”*

Touma bowed his head. *“Understood, thank you.”*

He took a swig of alcohol, ignoring how Ace and Luffy were glancing between the adults questioningly. Touma then looked at the boys, and asked, *“How badly do’ya wanna be Pirates?”*

It was a weird question.

“More than anything.” Ace said. *“It was our other brother’s dream to become a Pirate and be free...so I’m gonna do it for the both of us!”*

“I wanna be the Pirate King ‘cuz someone like that is strong, and free, and doesn’t have to follow anyone’s rules!” Luffy was resolute.

Touma smirked in approval. He leaned towards the boys and with a “come here” motion of his hand, indicated that they do the same. *“Tell me; have either o’you ever heard of Haki?”*

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Present Day:

Nezumi wasn’t having a good day. It had been a miserable couple of days, actually. He and his men ended up having to share the brig (but thankfully not the cells) with the Arlong Pirates. The smell of fish clung to the Humans. As for the Fishmen, Humans had a body odor that was the equivalent of wet garbage that had been stuck in a ditch for a week.

Snuzu's assistant, Captain Oki, walked in and simply pointed a manicured finger at Nezumi. "I'm gonna let you out for a bit. You try anything, I have permission to break your legs." A weirdly happy smile was on her lilac-tinted lips. "So, *please* do feel free to try something."

Nezumi shivered, and he was marched towards Snuzu's office with Oki's vice-grip on his arm. Upon entering Snuzu's quarters, the first thing Nezumi noticed about him was that the Commodore was slouched back in his chair with his feet up on the desk. Snuzu appeared to be dozing, and none-too gently, Oki shoved Nezumi into a chair.

"Bitch." Nezumi muttered under his breath. He honestly didn't intend for Oki to hear him, but she slowly turned to glare flatly at him.

Oki raised a brow, and Nezumi quickly lowered his head. With practiced ease, she simply walked over to Snuzu's side and poked him, before taking her place at his right.

Snuzu blinked a few times, yawned, and then focused on the man who was growing increasingly nervous. He didn't say anything, at first. Gathering his thoughts, Snuzu finally said,

"I've written a report and sent it to Headquarters, detailing exactly what you've done. I've been given permission to see to your punishment as I see fit."

Nezumi wondered if begging would do any good.

"Your actions, or lack thereof, led to the deaths of hundreds; civilians and Marine alike. Because you didn't have a hand in what Arlong did directly, you won't be held responsible..." Snuzu yawned, and looked ready to sleep again. Oki poked his shoulder, "...for the events at the Conomi Islands...but you are no longer a member of the Marines. You're blacklisted."

Nezumi's jaw dropped, and he looked ready to argue. "But..." He wisely remained quiet when Oki fixed him with a stern glare.

"We're dropping you off at the next island, and I'll give you enough funds to last a few months."

Nezumi figured he should be thankful for at least that much. But he clenched his fists and scowled at the floor. Snuzu was on his list of least favorite people.

“One last thing,” Snuzu drawled, and he shoved the Den-Den Mushi on his desk closer to Nezumi. “I’ll allow you a phone call. Supervised, obviously. But if there’s someone in the Navy that you want to make contact with for assistance in getting home or a new...(yaaawwwnnn) ...job – that’s *not* with the Navy, there’s no way you’ll be able to do that on an unsecured line.”

Within the Navy, high-ranking officials had connections that mattered; whether it was through the World Government or had friends in high places with Nobles and civilians alike. Giving Nezumi the chance to at least still make a living was being very gracious on Snuzu’s part.

Nezumi didn’t like having either Snuzu or Oki there, but what choice did he have? Dialing the number, and a few rings later, Brannew picked up on the other end.

“Hello?”

“Commander Brannew? It’s Cap-Nezumi...”

“Nezumi?” there was a sort of sigh. *“I’ve heard the news. Are you calling about a referral?”*

“Well-I...there’s a kid who can manipulate sand. He seems really dangerous, and probably should get a bounty put on him, sooner, rather than later...”

The sigh was more audible this time. *“Nezu...you aren’t a Marine Captain anymore. You can’t put a bounty on anyone. Plus, there’s the fact you have little to no credibility after this whole stunt you pulled.”*

“Don’t “Nezu” me!” Nezumi started, before he trailed off and slumped in defeat. Oki snorted and rolled her eyes. “...Yes, sir...I’ll take the referral, Sir.”

“Good choice. Now, I know someone on Varity Island in Roshi Village, so you can get a job with him...”

Nezumi was dropped off on an island with a change of clothes – his uniform was long-gone by now – an extra set of clothes, and a bag with a few thousand bellies.

“Make it count,” Captain Oki said, as she handed him his things.

Nezumi sat on the docks until the ship had disappeared over the horizon. He cursed the Pirates, and especially that of Gaara – who in

his opinion, was the cause of all his current troubles. *All* of his hard work over the years had been wasted in one day.

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Back on the ship, Captain Oki ordered former Captain Nezumi's men out onto the deck. She slammed her club down onto the deck, getting their attention. But it was also to wake up Snuzu, who had fallen asleep on his feet.

"Huh?" he muttered.

"Listen to your new commander, scum!" Oki shouted, and then she pointedly looked to the Commodore – who looked ready to sleep again.

Snuzu yawned, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Well, Captain Nezumi has been dishonorably discharged. As for all of you... (yyyaaawwwnnnn) ...because you followed his orders in endangering and stealing from civilians for financial gain, and didn't assist the Conomi Islands in their time of need...for your inaction...all of you are now the equivalent of cabin boys for the next three years. You also won't be eligible for promotion for..." Snuzu started to fall asleep again, but was awoken by Oki, "...*another* three years."

Sighing at all of these annoyances, Snuzu added, "That includes pay – which will be reduced to that of a new recruit's. You're also losing your vacation time. It's annoying, but you'll all be sent to assist the Conomi Islands in rebuilding, so we're sailing back that way once we drop off the Fishmen and resupply. I don't feel like telling you the consequences you'll suffer if you try to shirk your responsibilities, but know that you won't like it – and you'll wish you were with the Fishmen."

The Marines who had formerly served under Nezumi all knew how lucky and grateful they should be. This punishment was light compared to what others had received, so they saluted. The men shivered under Oki's gaze, before she scoffed.

"Dismissed."

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Conomi Islands; Cocoyashi – Three Days after Arlong's defeat:

Nami was gathering her things, finally setting off to accomplish her

dream. Her shoulder was slightly tender from its new tattoo. There were books from her childhood; ones about topography, navigation, and more.

“I’m leaving now, Belle’mere-san...” Nami whispered. “You would have liked the people in my crew...” She would have teased Naruto and Gaara; would have threatened Luffy to take care of her precious daughter with a smile on her face; would have traded recipes with Sanji and Pudding; would have had a shooting match with Usopp; would have drunk herself silly next to Zoro. Nami sighed and smiled. “Thank you, Belle’mere-san.”

As she exited her home, Nami tripped. For a brief moment – Nami could’ve sworn – she was *pushed*. That she felt a warm hand on her back, and that there was the smell of cigarettes and oranges. Nami turned around to look behind her, feeling a sense of peace and satisfaction.

“Nami?”

Nami glanced down at Gaara, who was looking up at her curiously. His eyes landed on her throat, where the sunlight glinted off of the abstract orange charm that she now wore on a cord around her neck.

“Looks good doesn’t it?” Nami asked, pointing at the charm. “I really like it.”

Gaara suddenly looked away from her and muttered, “I came to help you carry your things.”

In spite of his tone and words, there was a pleased smile on the corner of Gaara’s lips. Nami noticed, and had to smile herself.

Nami didn’t object to the help, and Gaara’s sand made carrying things easier. A crowd had gathered to see her off, and there were tears and well-wishes called out as she passed. At the dock, Nami and Nojiko hugged each other tightly, as if both would disappear if the other let go.

“Goodbye, Nami.” Nojiko whispered.

“I’ll write to you.” Nami promised.

Gaara lifted Nami onto their ship with his sand, and Nami waved goodbye, smiling joyfully. And yes, she was crying. But she quickly wiped her tears away, and called out,

“Goodbye, everyone! I’m off!”

Then, Nami took her spot as Navigator and they were finally leaving.

The residents of Cocoyashi whooped and cheered, while Spotty let out a bellow, and said farewell in his own way.

“Goodbye, Spotty!” various members of the Straw-Hats called out, and the sea-cow mooed and flapped its fins.

It was kind of strange to Nami that Conomi now had a resident sea monster that was basically the island’s pet. Apparently, Mohmoo – now dubbed “Spotty”, had decided to stay since Pudding had fed him various desserts that had fish and oranges as the primary ingredients.

How Pudding had managed that, Nami wasn’t going to ask.

It seemed that Spotty had also liked the meat pies that one of the Cocoyashi residents prepared, and in spite of what he had done to Gosa, the sea cow was growing on the locals. He actually had a pretty sweet personality once people got passed his size and incredible appetite.

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After making sure that everyone was fed and watered, Sanji settled down, sitting next to Pudding as she read a book. There was a small smile on her lips and light blush colored her cheeks. The sunlight hit her just right; accentuating the natural highlights in her hair.

Nami-swan was enjoying the food he and Pudding had prepared – and it was lovely to see Nami genuinely enjoying the food – the way she smiled and closed her eyes for a few bliss-filled seconds as she popped fruit tarts into her mouth – or the orange-glazed meatballs that made her give out satisfied hums.

Just then, a shout sounded from the base of the crow’s nest, and that stupid cactus-head was glaring at Naruto – Naruto was smirking at him and laughing. Sanji wondered what had happened, and he somewhat regretted missing what had irritated Zoro so much. Zoro suddenly reached out and smacked Naruto over the head with a fist. Something uncomfortable (chillingly familiar) rose up in Sanji – it made him want to go pummel that cactus-head until he was black-and-blue because who would treat their own brother – even if they weren’t related by blood – so cruelly?

Naruto reached out and began pulling at Zoro's face, and they pushed at each other with Naruto using colorful language that honestly – made Sanji raise a curly brow. Zoro was cursing at Naruto as well, and threatening to “tie him up and make him walk beside the ship.”

“Gaara! Tell Zoro-nii he's mean!” Naruto demanded as he pointed at Zoro.

“Why would I do that? Zoro-nii's the coolest.” Gaara said very seriously, and Zoro smirked victoriously.

“Gah! Because he's being a stingy jerk, ‘ttebayou!”

Gaara glanced up from his own food and looked at his brothers. “I don't really care.”

“Traitor!” Naruto declared. Naruto then quickly turned on Zoro.

Zoro began laughing as he pushed Naruto away and held him back with his foot and he smirked while holding the plate of meatballs that was meant to be shared between the three of them out of Naruto's reach.

“Hmm-mm, so good!” Zoro dramatically said as he savored a meatball. All of this was over the meatballs? Sanji wondered if he should have made more – even though there was rice and veggies, along with what tarts Pudding had made.

Naruto looked about ready to burst in his frustration - when the plate was handed to him. Zoro took one more meatball for himself; at that moment, Sanji was perplexed. For a few brief seconds, Zoro's expression was different. He had a teasing smile on his face and the usual scowl was gone. This wasn't a smirk – it was a genuine expression of amusement that held no malice.

Naruto accepted the plate although he was still scowling, and he pouted as Zoro ruffled his hair and said with a laugh, “Damn brat.”

Naruto's response was, “Asshole.”

Just like that, the expression was gone and Zoro guzzled his sake. Rolling his eyes, Naruto put several of the meatballs onto his own plate before handing the plate back to Zoro.

“Make sure you eat all that, okay, Zoro-nii?”

"Tch, whatever, brat." Zoro replied as he ate another meatball.
"You're still growing, ya'know."

"You can't always live on sake or "train", Zoro-nii." Gaara said very pointedly around a mouthful of food.

Zoro rolled his eyes in response.

Sanji had no idea what had just transpired. It was a surreal scene. His birth family – he knew had been cruel; and life with Zeff had been anything but normal. What was considered "normal" anyway?

Some minutes later, Gaara was then next to Zoro and was showing him something that he had carved while he was eating. From where he was, Sanji couldn't exactly tell what it was; but it looked, quite frankly, terrible. The thing was a bit bigger than Sanji's fist and had strange protrusions sticking out of it. The second carving looked... well, like a mish-mash of pieces. But there was a different affectionate expression again as Zoro held the carving ups and he smiled as he was talking to Gaara – Sanji felt a mild twinge in his chest because – *that was how his mother had looked at him whenever he brought her food.*

Gaara looked particularly pleased as he rocked on his feet. Sanji then looked at the bracelet on Zoro's wrist with its weird looking charms. No wonder he wore that gaudy thing.

Sanji had noticed the weird charm Nami was wearing as well. She often toyed with it in her delicate fingers whenever she was looking over the map or reading. Gaara must have given her that thing, too.

The expression disappeared again as Zoro handed Gaara back his carving, and Gaara happily ran towards the cabin while Naruto followed after him, excitedly shouting about a fox? They called out to Usopp as well, and within minutes Luffy somehow got involved too and all of them disappeared into the cabin.

It was a strange thing, Sanji figured. Did the cactus-head even realize how he looked at those two? Sanji's own siblings had unchanging, smiling faces that reveled in their cruelties. Sanji walked over to collect the dirty dishes.

When Zoro glanced up at him as he approached, Sanji commented, "You really care about those two."

Zoro snorted. "Those brats are far too troublesome for their own good. They'll make you want to walk the plank of your own free will."

“Aww, you’re such a caring older brother,” Sanji teased. “Wouldn’t have expected it from the likes of you.”

Zoro bristled. “And what’s *that* supposed to mean?!”

Sanji shrugged. “Well...you have actual substance beyond just drinking and playing with swords. You have a heart beneath that angry, prickly, exterior.”

“I’ll skewer you, you half-rate cook!”

There was some inelegant squabbling and insults before Nami shouted at the two to behave – and Sanji would never ignore a woman’s calls.

So he grabbed the dirty dishes and walked away – but not before Zoro flipped him the bird. Sanji responded by grinning triumphantly just to annoy Zoro, and flipping the bird right back before he turned on his heel and went to the kitchen.

Sanji wondered how they had come under Zoro’s care. He wouldn’t have pegged Zoro as the responsible type to care for two kids. It wasn’t any of his business, but there was certainly a story there. He’d certainly ask at some point in time.

When Sanji entered the kitchen, he saw Luffy, Usopp, Naruto, and Gaara, all huddled around the table, painting those strange figurines Gaara had made.

One looked like a fat-tailed gecko with four bulging eyes, and the other...was it a turkey with horns? *Maybe* a peacock?

Sanji shrugged. It wasn’t like he was an art critic.

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Some hours later, everyone but Luffy was gathered out on the deck enjoying the mid-afternoon breeze that was pushing their ship along.

“Hey, everyone!” Luffy called out, getting his crew’s attention. Luffy proudly held up the flag he had painstakingly been working on for the past several hours. No-one said anything right away, as they stared at the design on the flag. “Well, whaddya think?”

“Is that supposed to be our Jolly Rodger?” an incredulous Nami asked.

“Yeah!” Luffy enthusiastically answered.

“It’s...it’s actually not that bad.” Zoro said, and he shrugged in a ‘what?’ motion at the stares being sent his way by Usopp, Sanji, and the girls.

“I know these things are supposed to strike fear into people’s hearts, but it’ll strike fear in people for all the wrong reasons...” Usopp said.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Naruto asked. “Luffy’s art is just like Gaara’s!”

“I really like it, Captain.” Gaara genuinely praised. Of course, out of all of them, *he’d* be the one to like it.

“*Shishishishi*, thanks, Gaara!”

“Um...” Usopp raised his hand, “Maybe...I should try? Like, use your design as a base.”

Luffy shrugged. “Okay.”

Usopp sat back from his work, and now, a smiling skull with a straw hat adorned the black material. He was proud of himself as the other crewmembers exclaimed and praised his skill.

“That’s great, Usopp!” Luffy practically bounced from where he was sitting. “Can you paint that on the sail?”

“Sure!”

Usopp had unexpected but appreciated help in the form of the younger Roronoa Brothers – who could stick to Merry with their feet and hands with no need for a ladder. The two started competing on how fast they could paint their section, and Usopp ended up being pulled into it too.

“You kids stand no chance! I’m a champion painter throughout the Grand Line!”

“Really? That’s amazing, Usopp, ‘ttebayou!”

“How can you be a champion painter if you’ve never been to the Grand Line?”

Usopp balked a little, and glanced up at Gaara, who looked very genuine with his question, and wasn’t teasing at all.

Usopp quickly adjusted his story to say that he was *known* throughout

the Grand Line, as his reputation preceded him.

“Oh. That makes sense.”

Down on the deck, the others were watching in curiosity and amazement.

“That’s amazing!” Luffy couldn’t help but stare. “How do you guys do that by the way?”

“Chakra.” Zoro said, “It was how we walked on water before.”

“Chakra.” Nami looked incredulous. “Like that spiritual energy stuff?”

Though, her eyes widened when Zoro lifted up his hand and it started glowing with chakra.

“Its energy,” Zoro started saying, but he was cut off when Pudding was suddenly in his face.

“That’s what that stuff is?” she asked, her nose inches away from his.

“Uh...yeah?” Zoro answered as he slowly tried to pull away.

Pudding thrust her hand in front of Zoro, and it started to glow...with chakra. Zoro was gaping at her now.

“I’ve been able to do this since I was a child, but...I had *no idea* I could use it like you do!” Pudding looked hopeful. “Would you mind teaching me? I’ll be a *very good* student.” Pudding’s cheeks colored as she added, “And if I mess up, feel free to scold me as you see fit.”

“Uh...sure...but we probably shouldn’t practice on the ship.” Thankfully, Pudding had sat back, giving Zoro space to sit up again. “Expelling too much chakra into a surface can cause it to explode. Naruto’s injured people by doing that, and it’s how I’ve broken my opponents’ swords.”

Pudding smile could be described as chilling when she said, “Oh, really? That is *very* interesting.”

“There are some Jutsu I think we can practice...it’ll be easier if we find your element, though.”

“How do we do that?” Pudding asked.

“Chakra Induction Paper,” Zoro answered. “I’m pretty sure we have

some somewhere. Basically, you flush chakra into it, and it'll have a certain reaction depending on the element."

"Oh...that's so cool~" Luffy was bouncing in his seat. "Can I try?"

"Uh...I don't think you have chakra." Zoro said awkwardly, scratching the back of his head. Luffy gave Zoro his best puppy-dog look. "...I'll get some for you too, Luffy."

Zoro went to find the paper. Not long after, Zoro found that the paper had been stuffed into the back of a dresser drawer underneath underwear and miscellaneous junk he and the boys had accumulated over time. Its corners were bent and wrinkled, and it appeared that Naruto had used it as a flipbook.

Zoro grabbed three sheets, and presented one to Pudding and one to a very excited Luffy.

"Channel your chakra into it, like this," Zoro demonstrated, and his sheet became soaking wet before tearing in half seconds later. "This means I have both Water and Wind affinity. Now you."

Luffy focused on the paper, but nothing happened. He groaned and gritted his teeth in determination, trying to get the paper to respond. Luffy sat there, with his tongue sticking out in concentration.

Pudding focused, and seconds later, her sheet wrinkled for a moment before it burst into flame and turned into ash.

"Lightning and Fire affinity, that's really good." Zoro commented, not caring to notice Pudding blush.

"Lightning and Fire? That's *perfect*." Pudding leaned in close to Zoro. "Must be because of all my passion for the men in my life."

"I'll get some books and scrolls you can look at..." Zoro said distractedly, thinking of what they had on hand.

Pudding pouted at Zoro's obliviousness.

Luffy groaned when his paper *still* wouldn't do anything.

"I wouldn't bother with him too much, Pudding-chan." Sanji advised. "Getting through that thick head of his is like trying to crack a coconut with a butter knife. A hopeless endeavor, really."

Sanji smirked when Zoro reacted.

“Go fuck yourself sideways, you half-rate cook!”

“Half-rate?!” Sanji rolled his eyes and took a drag. “As if, you half-witted moss-for-brains.”

The two of them glare at each other intensely; the tension between them is palpable. Those who actually cared to look at what was going on could see the building sparks. Suddenly, the two are at each other’s throats; cursing the other as Sanji kicked at the Swordsman and Zoro tried to cut the Chef.

Nami sighed and called out to Sanji that she was thirsty for a cold beverage.

Just like that, it seemed a switch was flipped and Sanji actually *skipped* to the kitchen to make Nami a drink; while Zoro went on his original quest for reading materials for Pudding as if he hadn’t been fighting with Sanji just seconds earlier.

Nami sweat-dropped when she noticed Pudding glaring at her, pouting.

“What?”

“Humph.” Pudding crossed her arms and focused on the ocean instead.

Nami was confused.

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Once the sail was done, Gaara settled down with his gourd and went to work. Barely half an hour later, Gaara inspected his gourd, and the straw-hat-wearing skull that now adorned it. Now, people would know where he belonged.

“I see an island, ‘ttebayou!”

“That’s Loguetown!” Nami announced. “That means we’re close to the Grand Line. This place is a major stopping point for Pirates.”

“Let’s go! Let’s go!” Luffy was ecstatic. “That’s where Rodger was executed – where *everything* started!”

“Well...we *do* need to get some supplies...” Pudding said, making a mental list. “We have enough money that we’ll be able to get good quality ingredients and clothing for when we come across a winter

island.”

“We should also get some stuff for Merry’s upkeep.” Usopp said.

“I need to get two more swords.”

“I wanna get another kusarigama!” Naruto joyfully announced.

Zoro raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure, brat?”

Naruto beamed up at his brother, “I wanna make my own style!”

Resigned, Zoro replied, “Fine, you’re the one who has to train.”

Naruto whooped.

“I’ll go get some money...”

“Hold up!” that was Nami. “You think you can spend money, just like that?”

“When it’s mine, yeah.”

“Oh, no, you don’t, mister!” Nami poked a finger into Zoro’s chest. “We have to budget ourselves, so we won’t have to worry about the future.”

“Who put you in charge of the money?!” Zoro demanded. “Besides, we have plenty to spare!”

“I put myself in charge. I’m the treasurer. And you shouldn’t be so casual about spending *our* money!”

Zoro sounded extremely sarcastic as he spoke. “I’m not! And *since when* were you put in charge of *our* funds?”

“Anyway,” Nami ignored Zoro’s glare, “I’ll give you...*100,000*.”

“That’s not enough.” Zoro said, crossing his arms. “*1,000,000*.”

“One-are you *insane?! You* can’t honestly think of spending *that* much!”

“How much do you think a decent blade costs? That’s being pretty reasonable since you’re being stingy”

“Stop arguing with Nami-swan, you uncouth Neanderthal!”

“Stay out of this, dumbass swirly-brow!”

“Fine, fine...200,000, 20% interest.”

“You...Make it 9, you stingy bitch.”

“Oh, how civil, Zoro-kun!” Nami laughed. “300,000, with 40% interest.”

“You can’t do that!” Gaara finally spoke up, getting Zoro and Nami’s attention. “It’s not like it’s yours. It’s not fair, why do we have to pay you back for our money?”

“It’s everyone’s money now, Gaara-kun.” Nami said with a smile that masked the slight nervousness against Gaara’s glare. “I’m just managing it more wisely.”

“But Zoro-nii and Naruto need more than that!”

Fine, I’ll make it 900,000...with 75% interest.”

Zoro glowered at Nami before he groaned in defeat. “Thanks for trying, sand-brat.”

Gaara looked ready to argue again, but Nami patted his head. “You’re so cute when you’re riled up and threatening people, Gaara-kun!”

Gaara gaped up at Nami wide-eyed before covering the lower half of his face with his scarf. An indignant mutter of, “I’m *not* cute...” could be heard.

“I’m gonna go see the execution platform,” Luffy said, jumping up on the railing and clinging to the mast with a stretched-out arm. “The place where Gold Rodger died...”

“Rodger...?” Gaara was paying attention to Luffy now, and no, he wasn’t sulking about losing to Nami. Whatever it was that he had lost. “Rooster-head told me about him...”

“Oh! Wanna go see the platform with me, Gaara?”

“Okay...”

Now that Gaara’s attention was off of her, Nami breathed out in relief. She was slightly surprised that she had gotten away with teasing Gaara. His response hadn’t really been what she had expected; and she’d found it endearing.

Ichibi laughed, because he had felt Nami's fear, and yet she had been so casual and teasing about the whole thing. He knew that Gaara's cheeks had flared at Nami's comment. In spite of his tone, Gaara hadn't been insulted or angry. The kiddo's reaction was truly amusing.

"We should get some more ingredients while we're here," Sanji said thoughtfully. "The market could have rare ingredients."

"Oh, and I need to check for any specialty bookstores!" Pudding looked elated.

"Sanji-kun, Pudding-chan," Nami got the pair's attention before she glanced to see how far away the others were, "Make sure to stock up; Luffy and the younger Roronoa brothers can eat quite a bit..." she paused for a moment, then added, "Just so you know, if we're low on food, Zoro will skip out on eating and call it "training" so that the others can eat."

Sanji's eyes widened, somewhat. Oh. The snippet of conversation had caught between the brothers earlier made a bit more sense.

"Don't tell him you know, and since you two are here, I doubt he'll ever even check. You should at least know how that idiot will get when it comes to his brothers."

Pudding looked teary-eyed. "He's *such* a good man!"

Sanji rolled his eyes as he took the belli Nami was giving him. He could easily be twice the man that thick-headed Marimo was.

"That's a 45% interest, got it, Sanji-kun?"

"Of course, Nami-swan." Sanji gently laid a kiss on Nami's hand.

Pudding gave what appeared to be a nod of approval, and she leaned in and whispered, "You win this round, Nami-chan."

Nami frowned in confusion. *What* had she won?

The two Chefs then left for the market, with Pudding holding onto Sanji's arm.

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Loguetown was actually a pretty decent looking place: cobblestones and well-built wooden buildings lined the streets. It was fairly crowded; understandable since it was the weekend. Zoro unwittingly

shifted a little to his right, and moments later, a young woman ran into him.

Zoro's bulk, combined with his instinctively using chakra in his feet to remain upright caused the woman to stumble ungracefully to the ground. Her glasses slipped off and landed by Zoro's feet.

"Ow..." the woman muttered, rubbing her sore nose. "Where'd you even come from?"

"Oh, uh, sorry." Zoro said a little awkwardly as he knelt down to retrieve her glasses. "Here..."

"Oh! Thanks!" she removed her hand from her face to reach for her glasses...her face...she looked *just like*...

Zoro balked, he unwittingly tightened his fist, accidentally breaking the glasses in his hand.

"Hey! What the hell?!"

"Shit..." Zoro dropped the broken glasses to the ground and grabbed the woman's arm and pulled her to her feet. "Sorry..."

Naruto was staring at Zoro, who he had never seen act so flustered before.

"My glasses! You're going to pay for those, mis-!"

"Here!" Zoro shoved a stack of several hundred belli into the woman's hands.

"H-what?" the woman looked perplexed and very annoyed as Zoro grabbed Naruto's arm and took off. "Wait, you have to..."

Tashigi exhaled as she shoved the bellies into her pocket. What a weird guy. Plus, running away like that? How rude.

Zoro was running with Naruto, and it wasn't until Naruto noticed that they had passed by the same restaurant several times before he flushed chakra into his feet so that they'd be yanked into stopping. Zoro lost his grip on Naruto and nearly tripped flat on his face; while Naruto was lucky his arm didn't come out of its socket.

"What the hell, Zoro-nii? What *was* that?"

Zoro stood up, muttering under his breath. He glared at the ground for

a moment, before saying, “That girl...she had Kuina’s face.”

“Kuina...? Oh...”

It was far too weird and uncanny. Is that how Kuina would have looked? Except this Kuina-look-a-like definitely smiled more and didn’t carry herself like Kuina did. Kuina would have dodged. She then would have admonished him for being so inattentive.

Zoro covered his eyes and sighed heavily, his other hand resting on Wado Ichimonji.

“Hey, Zoro-nii.” Naruto grabbed Zoro’s arm, hoping to distract him. “Let’s go get our weapons, ‘ttebayou.”

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Finding a weapons shop was relatively easy; but finding one that suited their budget narrowed things down a bit. But they came upon one that actually looked relatively decent.

Ipponmatsu the shopkeeper was bored; really, *really* bored. He had cleaned his shop unnecessarily and then had cleaned it again. It had been way too long since he had any customers...why, just a few years ago business was booming! And then that overzealous Marine Smoker just *had* to do his job so damn effectively!

Ipponmatsu sighed. He jolted a bit when the bell to his shop rang – and there were a couple of boys entering his shop!

“Oh! Welcome!”

“Yo!” the younger of the two greeted.

The older one glanced around before stating, “We only have a budget of just under 900,000 between the two of us, so be mindful of what you pick, okay, brat?”

“Okay...”

That was mildly annoying – depending on what they wanted to get, it wouldn’t be worth much. At least one of his decent weapons cost 900,000 alone. He studied them – the older one already had a sword, and the other had an older, but obviously well cared-for kusarigama.

He studied the older boy’s weapon – and noticed much to his shock... no way...this kid had *Wado Ichimonji*!?

“Hey kid,” Ipponmatsu started and he gave his best salesman smile. “I’ll be willing to take that sword off of you for...let’s say 100,000? Then, that’ll raise your budget up a bit m—“

“No.”

“What about 110?”

Ipponmatsu failed to notice the glare as he added, “Fine, 120.”

“You make one more offer on my sword and I’ll cut off your arms starting with your fingertips.” Zoro said darkly, flicking his sword guard so that it made a very satisfying **shink** as the blade came partially out of its sheath.

That got Ipponmatsu to back down – what a scary guy!

Still slightly annoyed, Zoro was looking at cheaper swords that were gathered pretty randomly in a barrel when he happened to look up at the wall to notice several posters that depicted detailed drawings of swords...was that...no way. Zoro looked at the name of a particular sword on one of the posters just to be sure: it was Kubikiribōchō, Zabuza’s sword. There were also posters depicting other swords...of the Seven Swordsmen of the Mist.

“One of the Lost Seven?” Zoro questioned, reading the characters. “Oi, old man.”

“Yes?” Ipponmatsu was glad that he had managed to keep the tremble out of his voice.

“What’re the Lost Seven?”

“Oh, seven legendary swords that disappeared hundreds of years ago. If it weren’t for actual historical accounts of people seeing them being used in battle, then they’d simple be nothing more than fanciful lore.” Ipponmatsu began excitedly. It was nice to have a captive audience, and share this with someone who actually asked. “They were special because only members of a certain and exclusive group could earn the right to wield them. The swords themselves were rumored to have unique and dangerous powers. The Swordsmen were an incredibly skilled and powerful secretive bunch from some far-off country that likely sunk deep into the sea long ago, and that’s why no-one’s ever been able to find them.”

“Swordsmen of the world have searched for those swords, and

blacksmiths have tried and failed to duplicate them.” Ipponmatsu gave a longing sort of exhale. “Whoever made those beauties...they must have used some very forbidden and risky techniques!”

That was interesting.

“Hey, Ipponmatsu-san!” an all-too-familiar voice greeted. “I’m here to pick up Shigure!”

“Hello, Tashigi-san.” Ipponmatsu said, not really bothering to keep the annoyance out of his voice. The Marines and a few locals were his only customers nowadays. “I’ll get your sword.”

“You!” Tashigi pointed at Zoro. “You’re lucky I had spare pair of glasses to hold me over until Monday! And running off like that? I really should make you clean the floors of our Base...”

Tashigi trailed off when she noticed that Zoro was pointedly trying to edge away from her and was resolute to not look at her.

“Here you go,” Ipponmatsu drew her attention away from how strange the guy was being.

Ipponmatsu set her sword on the counter, and Tashigi cuddled her precious Blade. “It’s so good to have you back, baby!”

Meanwhile, Zoro was very busy looking at a barrel-full of swords. He could swear that he felt something here. Closing his eyes, he reached out for that particular sword, and pulled out a blade that had a very nasty feeling to it.

Zoro smirked at his find. “How much for this one?”

“NO!” Ipponmatsu quickly protested, looking nervous. “That one is Cursed! It’s been the horrible downfall of all who have wielded it!”

His smirk only widened. “Is that so? How about we test my luck against this sword’s Curse?”

Zoro unsheathed the Blade and tossed it into the air – and then much to the horror of those observing, Zoro held his arm out in the falling sword’s path. The back of the sword’s edge was what brushed up against Zoro’s outstretched arm before its blade sunk deep into the floor.

There was a sense of amusement from the Blade and echoing laughter.

“I’ll take it.”

Ipponmatsu couldn’t believe it. “You...you wait right there!”

He suddenly disappeared into the back.

Tashigi collapsed to the floor in awe. That was...*amazing*! If she hadn’t seen it with her own eyes, she would have doubted anyone who told her! She was suddenly on her feet again, squealing – internally – because this was such a sight to see!

An ecstatic Ipponmatsu came out carrying another sword, and he held it out to Zoro. His wife, Ipponume was behind him. She eyed Zoro curiously; with an arched brow and a smile on her face.

“This is Yubashiri, a sword that has been in my family for generations. I want you to have it.”

“Are you sure?” Zoro asked, because he knew how big of a deal that was.

“Absolutely! It would be an honor for you to wield it. It’s not doing much good here.” Ipponmatsu smiled. “You can have them both for free, in fact!”

“Thanks...” Zoro said, accepting the proffered sword.

“My, three swords is quite the interesting feat, dearie.” Ipponume commented with obvious approval. “I can see why my dear husband would want you to have Yubashiri.”

Not really sure how to respond, Zoro said, “...I’ll take good care of it.”

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While Ipponmatsu had been talking to Zoro, Naruto went looking for another kusarigama; hoping to find one here. There were definitely more than enough swords of different lengths and styles. Spears and lances were hanging along one wall, or were collected rather messily in barrels; clubs on another...there were shields on that wall...

Finally, Naruto found a few kusarigama hanging on the wall in the corner. Naruto’s eyes sparkled; they were so shiny! He reached up to grab one at random, but stopped. Remembering what Zoro had told him about *Sword’s Spirit* – that a blade was more than a blade. It was asking permission while simultaneously demanding to be listened to.

It was asking for the honor while also showing you had the both the skill and the right to wield the blade.

So Naruto closed his eyes, and focused on the various kusarigama in front of him. There was whispering? Wait. One of them had a faint voice, he was sure of it. He reached forward, and picked up the one he had heard.

It was a beautiful, shiny black metal. It had a pattern carved into the blade; which looked to be a bird of prey. The weighted end had a sharp point and three talons.

The moment he touched it, Naruto felt...*something*. A tingling sensation that housed amusement and annoyance, and Naruto felt as if he were a child pestering an adult for their undivided attention. There was some sort of pulse. But it wasn't clear if the kusarigama approved of Naruto or not. It was probably testing him.

Naruto proudly walked over to where Zoro was, almost stopping in his tracks because that lady was *here*, in the weapons shop.

Choosing to ignore her because that was what Zoro was doing (or at least trying to), Naruto put the kusarigama on the counter. "How much for this, mister?"

"*GAHHH!*" Ipponmatsu screamed. "You shouldn't have that! That isn't a toy!"

Ipponmatsu reached to take the kusarigama, but Naruto pulled it closer to him.

"I wanna *buy* it! I'm not dumb enough to think it's a toy, 'ttebayou..."

"Boy, that Blade *isn't* something you should want." Ipponmatsu warned, somewhat desperately. "It's called Hayabusa, a Blade that is named after the man who first wielded it. It's said to have been made from the claw of an ancient dragon. Hayabusa was so skilled with that weapon, he could slaughter hundreds with just the swing of a single arc. Ill-luck has come upon those who've wielded it ever since Hayabusa, the man's passing. The blade has always cut those who've tried; more often than not, killing them."

Impulsively, Naruto nicked his arm with Hayabusa, and he could already see that he was healing. Ipponmatsu wasn't paying attention to the fact Naruto wasn't bleeding like a normal person, but rather that he had cut himself.

“Are you kidding me?!” Ipponmatsu couldn’t believe *two* different people thought that messing around with Named Blades that carried Curses was such a good idea.

“Oh, my...” Ipponume said, looking at Naruto with some concern.

“Look at that, Hayabusa, I’m not that easy to cut down,” Naruto said, “I wanna be an awesome Ninja who’s known the world over. Roronoa-Uzumaki Naruto is my name, and I want to use you on my journey, so let me wield you, ‘ttebayou!”

He fed some his chakra into Hayabusa , to prove a point. There was another pulse, then...Naruto could have sworn he heard laughter. It was different from Kyuubi’s; whose laugh echoed inside his mind. This was more... a *feeling* of that laugh that came from Hayabusa.

We’ll see...

Naruto beamed up at Ipponmatsu, and he was placing belli down, when Tashigi suddenly started yelling.

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Tashigi grinned at seeing Ipponmatsu so happy. She watched as the younger boy put his newly selected weapon up on the counter, and the shopkeeper was saying something to him. Ignoring that, Tashigi unwittingly on her part, invaded the teen’s personal space as she leaned in to inspect his swords.

Adjusting her glasses and failing to notice how he stiffened, she said, “Those swords are amazing! And three? There’s only one guy I know of who uses three swords...” her brow furrowed. Wait. Three swords... “What’s the third one...?”

Tashigi’s voice trailed off when she realized...a white sword...*this* was *Wado Ichimonji*.

Slowly, Tashigi straightened and she really *looked* at Zoro – scrutinizing him and ignoring his growing discomfort under her gaze which was slowly turning into a glare.

“You’re Zoro, aren’t you?” she asked quietly. “Roronoa Zoro?”

It was a good thing she was wearing gloves, because her fists were clenched so tight her fingernails would have drawn blood. Her hands shook and she glared at Zoro with tears in her eyes. “You *don’t* have a

right to that sword! Wado Ichimonji shouldn't have *ever* been in your hands! *You don't deserve it!*"

Tashigi drew her blade, and ignored Ipponmatsu, who protested about fighting in his shop and assaulting customers.

"This is *personal!*" Tashigi snarled at the man, who recoiled. He hadn't seen Tashigi ever get this angry; and it was *extremely* rare for anyone to see how angry she was capable of becoming. "Stay out of this!"

Ipponmatsu ducked behind the counter with a muffled, "Yes ma'am!"

"Now, listen here..." Tashigi blinked. She was talking to the air.

Zoro had grabbed Naruto's shirt collar and ran out the door while the crazy lady was yelling at Ipponmatsu.

Ipponmatsu received around 1,200 belli, which was only a fraction of Hayabusa's actual cost. But, he didn't really mind. Those weapons had gone to a couple of interesting people.

Tashigi ran out onto the street in time to see them turn the corner. She ran after them; and saw them run down an alley at another corner a few blocks down. How had they gotten that far so fast?!

"STOP!" Tashigi demanded, and she ran to where she had seen them turn...only to find a dead end. Where had they gone?! She cursed, and yelled, "Come out and face me, Roronoa!"

That thief wouldn't show his face! What a coward! Tashigi ran around the area, yelling for Zoro and frightening people as she asked i.e. terrifyingly demanded from people that she passed if they had seen Zoro. Frustratingly, it was always a 'no'.

Tashigi cursed as she made her way back to the Base. She would get Wado Ichimonji – she was determined to do it. She swore to herself that soon, Wado Ichimonji would be back to where it rightfully belonged.

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Tashigi had been born just a few years after Kuina. They looked so much alike, that they could have been sisters. If they had been born any closer in age, they could have passed for twins.

There were adults in the girls' lives that couldn't help but compare the

two somehow. It was in how they dressed, spoke, and acted. Most, if not all, of Tashigi's early memories was chasing after Kuina – copying the older girl wherever and whenever she could. Kuina had taken her copying with good grace, and seemed to like being the one to tell Tashigi what to do. To have someone hang on to her every word had made Kuina feel so grown-up and important.

But there were the obvious differences between them. Kuina had her father's nose and her mother's smile; while Tashigi had her mother's eyes and her father's expressions. Kuina had a tomboyish streak that didn't detract from her enviable grace. Ever since she was young, Tashigi was naturally clumsy; always running into things and tripping.

Glasses had helped, somewhat.

Some of Tashigi's favorite memories were practicing with bokutō as she and Kuina trained. Kuina was so focused; she didn't care what Koshiro had to say about girls learning swordsmanship. So, Tashigi trained right alongside her.

When Tashigi was five, almost six, her grandparents on her father's side started needing help around their home, so the decision was made that she and her parents would move to the island that was several weeks' worth of sailing to take care of them. It was logical, because even though there was family on her father's side, they were the only ones still residing in East Blue.

Tashigi said goodbye to her cousin who was more like a sister, and they promised each other to write. She situated herself in her new home, new school, new life, and was overjoyed to find that there was a local dojo. Things weren't so bad.

When Tashigi was eight, Kuina's letters started telling her of a boy whom Koshiro had taken in. Roronoa Zoro – which to Tashigi, was a funny name. Wasn't Roronoa the name of a swashbuckling Pirate in a book? And yes, it was.

It seemed that Roronoa Zoro was always chasing after Kuina; challenging her and losing horribly. Kuina told Tashigi about the bruises and she would inflict, and amusement mixed with annoyance was often the tone of the letters. One time, she knocked out one of Zoro's baby teeth, and broke his nose on more than one occasion.

But over time, the tone of the letters changed; and soon there was praise of Zoro's skills and how hard Kuina had to work and how she was excited. Zoro had become *something* in her cousin's life, and

Tashigi would admit to feeling a little jealous. It was a silly thing, really. She should be happy that Kuina felt challenged and looked forward to Zoro challenging her. Kuina's letters never stopped, but they *always* contained something about Zoro.

Tashigi was eleven when she learned of Kuina's death. She laid in bed for a week and lost several pounds.

There had been two letters – one that contained the unfortunate news; and the other that was Kuina's final letter to her, that was written the week before she died.

It had expressed doubts about herself; about her skills; how Zoro had come *just that much closer* to beating her.

'I sometimes wish I had been born a boy, so that way, Father would truly train me. I wish he'd see me as worthy. That's why I want to go beyond this dojo, and show the world what a Swordswoman can do. I want to prove to Father that I have a right to this dojo.'

But what if I fail? What if I'm not good enough?

Zoro's catching up to me, and soon he'll overtake me. That's the way it naturally is, with boys and girls.

I hate that I have to work so much harder than everyone else, but at the same time, I enjoy the challenge. I'm scared, Tashigi-chan, but at the same time, it's exhilarating.

Want to know a secret? I have Wado Ichimonji at my side, and it's a comforting thing. I know it hasn't "properly" been given to me yet, but I swear, I can hear a voice coming from it sometimes, like it's guiding me – encouraging me. I swear, it sounds like Grandpa. Weird, right?

Sword's Spirit is a funny thing.'

Tashigi determined that she would train – because her wallowing wasn't doing anyone any good, and Kuina wouldn't want to see her like that.

Seventeen – seemed like a good age to return to Crescent Island and Shimotsuki Village.

Tashigi returned with several goals in mind: she would ask Koshiro to train her, because she knew that Grandfather had passed on the knowledge of *Sword's Spirit* to him, even though he wasn't a

practitioner of the art himself. She would bow and beg for him to teach her, even though he didn't take girls. She would ask for Wado Ichimonji, because she would carry Kuina's ambition on her shoulders, no matter how heavy it was. She would join the Marines so she could use that beloved sword for a truly noble cause, and upon retirement, she would take over the dojo.

That was a goal worthy of Kuina's memory, wasn't it?

Tashigi prided herself on her ability to plan ahead. She was so meticulous about it.

Except – it seemed that things had changed.

There were girls in the class. Several of them in fact.

“How long has Uncle Koshiro been training girls?”

“Oh, um...around five-six years?”

He'd started training girls about six months after Kuina had... what had changed his mind?

Koshiro easily agreed to train her; she didn't even have to beg. She had had a speech prepared and everything. Since Tashigi didn't want anyone to think she had been handed this opportunity, she worked hard. He taught her to work *with* her clumsiness and use it to her advantage. Tashigi was skilled, and she advanced through his lessons, and she learned *Sword's Spirit* – or at least, got the basic techniques down.

She was proud of herself.

One day, she was tasked with putting something away in one of the bedrooms that had also become something of a storeroom. One side of the bedroom had boxes and supplies, and on the other side was a futon, a nightstand, and several large weights.

Tashigi stopped and stared at the opposite wall. On the wall there were tally marks. Thousands of them under a messily scrawled, **‘Kuina’** while the side that said **‘Zoro’** was blank. Tashigi counted the tally marks. 3,000. Zoro had challenged her so many times.

She saw the faded bloodstains on the weights. How hard had Zoro worked?

A twinge of something. Clearly, beating Kuina had been Zoro's goal. What would he have done if he had? Would he have gloated? No... from what she could gleam from the letters, Zoro would have respected her. He would have probably been relieved he wouldn't suffer any more broken bones and bruises from her.

Maybe.

Eighteen. She asked Koshiro if she could test out Wado Ichimonji; to see if a Named Blade would approve of her.

Koshiro had looked genuinely surprised that she'd even ask. *"I'm sorry, Tashigi-chan. I don't have it anymore."*

"WHAT?! Why?!" Even though she was surprised by her own outburst, Koshiro showed no response to it.

"I gave it to a former student of mine, Roronoa Zoro."

"You didn't have the right!"

That something, that twinge – she could finally identify it. Resentment towards Zoro built up within Tashigi, because it felt like Zoro had taken something from her. He had taken Kuina – whose letters always, *always* had mentioned him in some shape or form every week for almost three years. He had taken Uncle Koshiro, because she saw how Koshiro looked when talking about Zoro – a smile with a look of fondness and pride. Zoro had taken Wado Ichimonji – and Kuina's dream with it.

It was the first of many fights. It seemed that Tashigi went looking for them – she didn't intend to, but somehow, she always found some sort of keyword that made her angry and she'd *want* to fight. As for 'why' she couldn't really say. Maybe she wanted to fight so that she could finally hear what she wanted to hear – whatever that was.

But it always seemed, that she could scream and yell for all she was worth, and Koshiro was calm.

"Why did you give it to him?!"

"Because, he asked for it. His ambition was and still is incredibly strong. The sword accepted him."

"It shouldn't even be his sword in the first place!"

Angry that Zoro had gotten what had been Kuina's and should have been hers; the more she thought about it, the angrier she got. It was even more upsetting because Koshiro *always* had an air of calm when talking to her about Zoro. She wanted him to react to something; anything.

Tashigi regretted it the moment she said it. *"Are you replacing Kuina with Zoro?"*

There was a flash of something on Koshiro's usually impassive features; a darkness – anger, yes – and for the first time, Tashigi was afraid of her uncle in that split second. But then regret was there, as if anger had never been present at all.

In fact, he looked exhausted as he said, *"He's carrying Kuina's dream, Tashigi."*

"So you're giving him the dojo too?" there was hurt accusation in her tone.

Koshiro looked confused as he asked, *"Why would I give him the dojo?"*

"Because that's what Kuina wanted! She wanted the dojo!"

"Oh...yes, I suppose she did..." Koshiro's smile was fond. *"She would have done an amazing job, if I had..."* Koshiro's voice trailed off from whatever he was going to say, and instead he said, *"He's taking her blade to the top. That was the promise he had with her."*

The cryptic message was annoying. What was it with sword masters and not just saying what they mean directly?! Zoro had something with Kuina *she* didn't. No, she wasn't that jealous. At least, Tashigi tried to convince herself of that.

It seemed that there was something that could annoy Koshiro – when he had casually asked her what she intended to do after graduating.

Tashigi proudly told him her plan: Join the Navy, rise in the ranks, retire, and finish by taking over this dojo.

Koshiro frowned. *"You're joining the Navy?"*

There was clearly disapproval on his face – and it hurt to see it.

"You don't think I can do that either, don't you?"

Koshiro's expression changed. *"Excuse me."*

He left the room, leaving Tashigi with her doubts.

He came back, though, carrying a sword. Tashigi immediately recognized Shigure – the sword that would have been her mother's. It was a Named Blade that had been waiting for an owner as it was passed down for several generations in the dojo – often going to the second-born child.

“If you’re going to join the Navy...you’ll need a Blade like this at your side.” But Koshiro didn't look happy about it. There was a lot she wanted to ask him, but she didn't know the words. *“Are you sure you want to join the Navy?”*

“Yes...I do.” Tashigi hated that she hesitated.

“There is something you need to understand, Tashigi.”

Koshiro never really talked about where he had come from – it was a sore subject. Sometimes, he mentioned things, and Tashigi figured he was from Wano. Knowing some of what she did about the country now, a part of her understood why he wouldn't want to talk about it. He had escaped from an island that had cut itself off from the world, and anyone who escaped alive and intact was lucky.

That evening, Koshiro told her about the time he had killed a child – the nameless boy who had been so young and had no place being on a battlefield. People had thought less of him because he couldn't take fighting anymore. It was justifiable self-defense, and yet...the pain and regret on his otherwise unreadable features had spoken volumes.

About a friend named Sakumo and his son, Kakashi. What Sakumo had done, and the aftermath – and how it had affected Kakashi, who had been so young – *too* young to have to deal with the fallout and bitter at the world. Koshiro had wanted her to understand loyalties – and that rules *should* be broken sometimes – for the sake of others.

To stand by comrades; be there for people; and sometimes, authority *must* be questioned. Tashigi remembered seeing anger and bitterness there at times, depending on the subject. His dislike of the Marines was always clear; but he didn't discourage her.

Not really.

It seemed that there was something else there – a worry. It wasn't that she was joining the Marines; it was what the Marines represented.

“You need to know where you stand, Tashigi.”

It was the first time he had talked about himself beyond whatever his life had been before meeting her grandfather and marrying his eldest daughter. Tashigi realized that day the man she had known as her Uncle for her entire life was the shadow of a man long-gone. A man who had oddly become a pacifist; but was willing to show others how to fight. She vaguely remembered her grandfather talking about overcoming mountains, and cutting them down; and willing to be cut.

It seemed that Koshiro had come upon a mountain and was cut down – and just couldn’t bring himself to care enough to get up again.

A month after that conversation, she enlisted in the Navy and soon found herself under the command of Smoker.

From there, Tashigi kept her eye out for Zoro. But it was like he had vanished. The world was a big place, but she hated that she couldn’t find any sign of him.

At nineteen, Tashigi had climbed the ranks and established herself as Smoker’s right hand. She started hearing rumors about the Roronoa Brothers; Bounty Hunters of East Blue, and *Phantom Blade* Roronoa Zoro. Where had he been all this time?

At twenty, she ran into Zoro in Logue Town, and realized that Kuina’s beloved sword was being used for a life of piracy. The nerve! How *dare* Zoro use Kuina’s sword like that! Why hadn’t it rejected him?!

Tashigi was then determined – ever so much so, that she would take her Blade up against Wado Ichimonji. It would see her skill and devotion; it would feel her sense of Justice; and Wado Ichimonji would slip to the side so that Shigure would strike true. Then she could claim what was rightfully hers.

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The air prickled with the signs of an oncoming storm, and the sky was becoming overcast. Dark clouds could be seen further out, and thunder could be heard. It wouldn’t be long until rain started pouring, and the shopkeepers were already preparing for the storm by pulling their merchandise off of the street.

The crowd gathered in the town square wasn’t that bad; with some people lingering because the storm technically hadn’t really reached them yet.

“There it is, Gaara!” Luffy pointed, and Gaara looked at a platform that towered several feet over the square. “Come on, I wanna go to the top of it.”

Gaara just stayed on the ground and observed as Luffy sprung up onto the platform, and peered out over the crowd.

“This is the last thing, Rodger saw, huh...” he had seen old newspaper articles, photographs, even drawings of the infamous Rodger’s last moments. How packed the square had been. Shanks and his crew had told Luffy this story many times, telling him of how proud the man had been.

A sensation of something being swung at him... “Whoa!”

Luffy dodged an attack from a man in a jester’s costume by twisting away on his heel. He then ducked when a club swung at him; but that was when something was latched around his neck. All of his energy left him as Luffy was forced to lie down on his stomach.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Luffy asked, as he tried twisting around to see.

“Observe, everyone!” a man started shouting theatrically to the gathering crowd below.

“Huh, Boogum, is that you?”

“It’s *Buggy!*” the clown Captain snapped. “*Anyway*, today, we’re going to have an execution, folks!”

“But I don’t wanna get executed!” Luffy objected, writhing. Dammit, his rubber powers weren’t working for some reason! Wait...hadn’t Touma mentioned something about Devil Fruit users and mystery ocean rocks? Mystery ocean rocks sucked!

“You don’t get a say in this, Straw-Hat!”

Down below, Gaara’s shield was responding to several failed attacks from guns.

“Stay away from him,” one of the jesters warned a few of those with him. “That sand of his is weird!”

Gaara was about to deal with them when he heard the commotion up above and realized what was going on.

“Captain!” Gaara started running up the side of the platform as Buggy brought down his sword. He was furious! That red-nose *dared* to try and take Captain from them?! Gaara determined that he would crush every bit of Buggy very, very slowly.

"HEY!" Luffy called out to anyone who would listen, "I'm the guy who's gonna be the next Pirate King, ya'hear?!"

"Did he say Pirate King...?" someone in the crowd whispered.

More nervous murmurs followed - someone yelling about being the next Pirate King in the very place where Gold Roger died... It was nothing short of treasonous.

This wasn't how Luffy expected to go. There was so much he still wanted to do in life, but ah, well...people don't always get what they want. That was disappointing. He should apologize to his crew – his precious *nakama* – even the invisible people whom he didn't even have a chance to get to know... Luffy smiled, accepting his fate, “Sorry guys, I'm dead!”

At that moment, many things happened at once:

Gaara clotheslined the Buggy Pirates with a sand-leg. All of the Buggy Pirates who had piled onto the platform were hit by Gaara; save for Buggy who quickly split himself in half – Gaara's frustrated expression was quite glorious (even if it was chilling). Buggy was able to continue bringing his sword down, determined to cut off Luffy's head. Just then, the sky lit up, and there was an electrical energy surrounding Buggy's sword; and then lightning struck with a deafening **BOOM** that seemed to shake the ground itself.

Gaara's sand shot up to protect him from the strike. The force of the lighting was so great, that it caused the platform to collapse. Luffy sat up in the wreckage completely fine, and glanced around at the wrecked platform and the smoking Buggy Pirates.

Luffy was somewhat confused about what had just happened, and was about to comment on how close a call that was. “Whoa-oh!”

Gaara grabbed Luffy in his sand and began running the moment he saw various members of their crew down in the crowd.

“Hello, again, Luffy.” Alvida said as she stepped into their path, and Gaara skidded to a stop.

“Uh...who’re you?” Luffy asked. She felt familiar, but her face didn’t ring any bells.

“Oh, I ate the *Sube-Sube no Mi*, so I’m not really surprised you don’t recognize me...the only thing that really changed about me was...I lost my freckles.”

“Okay?”

“You hit me and sent me flying!” Alvida huffed, in an almost childish pouting tone. “You were the first man to ever do so!”

Luffy’s fist bounced in his hand. “Oh, you’re that whale lady!”

Alvida smiled wide, a blush covering her cheeks. “Just as brash as ever, I see! You really hold nothing back...Ever since I met you, I’ve discovered something about myself...” she was panting, somewhat, and her emotions felt wild and hot as she said, “I would *love* to get to know you better...in a more *personal* setting.”

“Luffy, Gaara, let’s go!” Usopp called. “The Marines are gathering at the port!”

Luffy and Gaara quickly sidestepped Alvida and continued their retreat, and she frowned.

“Oh, Luffy~” Alvida called after her fellow Captain, “You aren’t leaving me behind, are you?”

“Yep! Bye, creepy lady!”

“Don’t think you can escape me so easily!” Alvida skated after the two, gliding easily across the ground.

Nearby, a tic mark appeared on Pudding’s forehead. With an eerie smile, she handed her shopping bags to Sanji, “Sanji-dear, be a sugarplum and hold these for me?”

“Of course.” Sanji said, eager to please.

Pudding then charged directly at Alvida.

The love-struck woman was gliding towards Gaara and Luffy, a seductive smile on her face. “You can’t possibly escape my love, Lu--
OOOFFF!”

Alvida was cut off when Pudding suddenly struck with a Haki-

covered, flying round-house kick into Alvida's stomach. The woman went flying back; with her crew, the Buggy Pirates, and the Straw-Hats all watching with shocked expressions. Alvida hit the ground, and thanks to her Devil Fruit, slid almost thirty feet into a fruit stall; bringing it down on top of her.

Pudding glowered furiously; terrifying everyone who was watching. "Luffy-sweetie *is not* yours to seduce! As if your tainted, shallow love would *ever* be good enough for him!"

"Oh, Pudding! Nice kick!" Luffy grinned at her, causing Pudding to blush heavily.

"I'd do it again if you asked, Luffy-sweetie~!"

"So scary..." Usopp muttered to Nami, and she agreed.

Pudding's smile was once again sweet as she sauntered back to Sanji with a skip in her step. "Thank you for holding my things, Sanji-dear."

"You're so beautiful when you beat other people up, Pudding-chan!" Sanji cried, waving an arm as the other one was holding a mountain of supplies.

"You're so manly when you hold a woman's shopping, Sanji-dear!"

"Come *on*, we have to go!" Nami called out to the others, and interrupting the antics of Sanji and Pudding. "We need to get ahead of the worst of the storm!"

There was shouting from the rival Pirates, and that was when they realized that the Marines were gathering in the square.

"Stop right there!" a Marine pointed at them and shouted, but of course, the Straw-Hat Pirates wouldn't listen to a Marine's orders.

The crew ran for it, running in the back alleys and next to the waterways. All of a sudden –

"Roronoa Zoro!" Tashigi charged at Zoro and she balked when Zoro stepped backwards; only to disappear and appear further *ahead* on the path. What sort of Devil Fruit was *that*?

"It's the angry lady, 'ttebayou!"

"Get back here and fight me properly, Roronoa!"

“Get away from me, you crazy sword-otaku!”

Smoke surrounded them, and a voice commanded, “Hold it!”

Zoro quickly whirled around and drew Wado Ichimonji, and yanked Nami out of the way of a charging Tashigi. Their swords clashed, and Zoro was quick to respond to Tashigi’s strikes. She fought very, *eerily* similar to Kuina and Koshiro; but her style was slightly different. It was clumsy; yet at the same time, versatile and smooth. She used her clumsiness to her advantage; making her strikes difficult to predict and intercept. If Zoro wasn’t careful, the crazy sword-otaku could injure him.

“Hey!” Luffy was ripped off of his sandy ride and thrown to the ground the moment the smoke surrounded them.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you Pirates leave,” Smoker said as he shoved his jitte into Luffy’s back. “I’m going to have to arrest—”

Smoker was cut off when Gaara charged at him with a snarl and sand whirling around him. Smoker simply used his powers to turn into smoke to avoid this crazy kid’s sand powers. Except, he felt his jitte get ripped from his hold, and all of a sudden, a rubbery fist *hit* him. Smoker was violently shoved back, and forced to quickly reevaluate the situation.

He eyed Luffy’s retreating form in surprise. How could this brat could know Haki already? Crocodile was still alive and well, so did that mean the gourd had the Devil Fruit because the kid was holding onto his jitte with the look of someone who’d just struck gold. But he wouldn’t let these drawbacks stop him. Smoker was on his feet within seconds, and he was running forward when a hand grabbed his shoulder from behind, along with twisting his arm around behind his back.

Turning, Smoker froze when he saw the face of Dragon. He recognized the man even though his face was obscured by a hood.

“Sorry, but I won’t let you interfere with Luffy’s adventure.”

“Why do you care?” Smoker asked, unable to twist out of Dragon’s Haki-filled hold easily from where the other man gripped his shoulder. He quickly went into his smoke-form and shoved himself out of Dragon’s grasp. Dragon did let him go, showing that he wasn’t necessarily there to fight. He was merely the distraction.

“I have a vested interest.” Dragon responded as he watched his son and his crew run away. Interesting...he had never encountered someone with *two* personas – or whatever they were. But to have *two* people with those extra passengers; it was fascinating. The feeling he got from the two invisible people...it wasn't a feeling he could properly put words to.

Further ahead on the path, Tashigi yelled as she charged at Zoro, who kept doing that weird fading thing – and wouldn't properly fight her. He would only block – and Kuina's sword – Tashigi desperately reached out for it mentally, trying to get a feeling from it.

“Choose me! Choose me, dammit! I'll wield you with the honor and respect that you deserve!”

But not once, did Zoro falter. He refused to fight her and was awkward, but Wado – Kuina's sword – it wouldn't respond to her calls. Was it because she already had a Named Blade? Zoro had those other swords – and Wado *still* chose *him*.

Zoro pulled away and did something with his hands, and yelled something, but she missed it because she was angrily thinking about the not-fight, when the water in the nearby canal roared and rose high into the air like a typhoon.

Tashigi skidded to a stop and her jaw dropped as a twisting water-dragon formed and...slammed into her and the other Marines. Her glasses went flying off somewhere.

Dammit.

Smoker was gaping as well. And then he realized that the dragon was heading right towards where he and Dragon were standing. It was either continue fighting Dragon, who currently looked very starry-eyed at the water dragon; or dodge.

Smoker went to get out of the way, when Dragon suddenly yanked the back of his jacket and threw him to the ground. In a sudden burst of wind, Dragon disappeared. That bastard just wanted to be annoying. The water dragon soared over where Smoker was lying and crashed into a nearby pool before dissipating; leaving behind several dazed Marines.

The Marines coughed and spluttered, and Dragon was nowhere to be seen.

“That bastard...” Smoker muttered.

“That jerk!” Tashigi raged.

The other Marines groaned.

Up on one of the buildings, Dragon watched as Luffy and the others ran towards the docks.

“You’ve already found yourself an interesting crew, Luffy...”

Plus...Roronoa Zoro had ghosting abilities like that of Touma. He and his father had both mentioned having extended family. Perhaps he should mention it?

With one last look towards Luffy, Dragon chuckled. That boy truly was a free spirit, taking after his mother. Dragon was looking forward to the delightful storm that Luffy would surely bring.

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Now, as everyone was busy in town, Mohji and Richie had made their way down to the docks trying to find Luffy’s ship. It was miserable. Rain was coming down in buckets; and the wind was pushing them around.

Richie limped and stumbled as he carried a few crates of dynamite, and Mohji quickly reached out to help steady him.

“Once we find that guys ship, I’ll treat you to a steak dinner.” Mohji promised, and Richie rumbled in anticipation.

It turned out that Luffy’s crew had gotten a new ship. Plus, it was clearly theirs given that there was a skull wearing a rather obnoxious straw-hat on the flag and sail.

Mohji smirked as he and Richie tried boarding the ship to plant the dynamite – except – there was a loud **bang** and both the Beast Tamer and the lion were thrown several feet away. They both now sported several cuts and scrapes – and – what on the Grand Line was that *smell?!*

The stench permeated around them, and poor Richie began rubbing at his face with his paws. Mohji balked when he realized that the two of them were covered in neon-orange paint. Even in the pouring rain, the stuff wasn’t coming off.

There was a lot of yelling just then, and Mohji saw the Straw-Hats running to their ship. They completely ignored him. He watched as Gaara jumped onto the ship first and let down a path of sand for everyone to climb on board. Mohji also noticed that they had already gotten a few new members.

They were pushing off, and Richie cursed because they hadn't even done anything to Straw-Hat's ship.

The Beast Tamer hadn't even noticed why they were shouting. Mohji pulled himself to his feet, and was ready to attack when he was unceremoniously shoved to the ground. The smell of cigar smoke was above him, and he felt a hand on his head and around his arm.

"Halt right there, *Beast Tamer*."

"You!" Mohji realized that quite unfortunately, there were several Marines surrounding them.

Several of them had already tied Richie up and had taken care of the dynamite.

"Smoker-san!" a young woman said, facing Richie. "The Straw-Hats are escaping! What are your orders?"

"I'm right here, Tashigi." Smoker drawled as he cuffed Mohji. "There's no chance of us capturing them now, so let's head back to Base and process this guy."

Mohji cursed as he was dragged away. He wondered what had happened to Buggy and Alvida since Luffy was escaping Smoker.

Richie pouted as he loped alongside the Marines; with several ropes tied around his muzzle and neck, and Tashigi felt sorry for the poor lion. It looked as if it had gotten pretty beat up recently. The Marines would more than likely decide to kill it, since lions were pretty dangerous.

Mohji seemed to be thinking along the same lines as Tashigi, because he was yelling and cursing at the Marines to not hurt a single hair on Richie's head.

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Back at the Marine Base:

“We’re going to go after them.” Smoker determined, and Tashigi looked shocked.

“You don’t mean to leave your post, Sir?” she asked, dismayed.

“I don’t have a choice.” Smoker replied. “That kid was about to die... and he *smiled*. Just like *he* did back then.”

Gold Rodger had had that smile, even *after* death. His body hadn’t slumped forward like everyone else who was executed with that method always did. It had remained ramrod straight; as if refusing to bow to the world. The Marines had to physically put the Pirate King into lying position to cart him off.

Tashigi wasn’t sure why someone smiling before death was such a big deal. But...if going after this Monkey person also meant going after Zoro...

“Alright. I...I have to make a phone call...so, I’ll take care of that then gather my things...”

“Oh, and here,” Smoker pulled a glasses case out of his desk drawer and handed it to Tashigi, who blushed in embarrassment.

“Thank you, Sir...” Tashigi said quietly as she put on the glasses.

“Oi, Tashigi?” Smoker looked at her with concern, obvious only through how he merely raised an eyebrow. “Are you alright?”

“Roronoa Zoro has something that shouldn’t belong to him.” Tashigi said cryptically as she turned to leave. She tripped, and quickly caught herself. Tashigi saluted, and then left, closing the door behind her.

Smoker wondered if he should be worried. He hadn’t seen Tashigi look so upset, angry and distracted before. He hoped that she could focus on what was important.

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Tashigi sighed as she sullenly stared at the Den-Den Mushi as she shut the door to the phone booth. Taking a deep breath to prepare herself for the following conversation, she dialed a number and waited.

“*Buri, buri, buri...*” after a few more rings, a young girl’s voice answered, “*Isshin Dojo, this is Kaori! How can I help ya?*”

“Can...can you get Koshiro-sensei for me, please? Tell him it’s

Tashigi.”

“Okay.”

There was the sound of the receiver being set down, and the shuffling of footsteps. After several agonizingly long minutes, Koshiro’s voice came on, *“Tashigi? Are you alright?”*

“Uncle Koshiro...I...I met Zoro today.” Tashigi replied, and she cursed how her voice shook. But she had to know. “Why’d you give him Wado Ichimonji? He’s not even part of our family.”

There was silence, then... *“I see. First of all, it as I told you: he asked if he could have it after Kuina...after she died. Second, Zoro may not be blood but he is family.”*

Zoro wasn’t family to *her*.

“You could have at least let *me* have a chance at wielding Wado! Not him! What makes him so special that you’d just give something like that away?!”

Even though Tashigi already knew what Zoro’s goal was in facing Mihawk and using Kuina’s sword to accomplish that goal... it was the sort of argument a person brought up hoping to hear something different even though the unwanted answer would always be the same.

“We’ve had this conversation before. You know the answer to that. His resolve and his promise to Kuina. Wado Ichimonji is a Named Blade...if he was not meant to wield it then it would have rejected him within the first few weeks of having it.”

“So you think I’m not good enough to wield it?” Tashigi accused. She didn’t stop the tears from flowing and her voice choked. Wado Ichimonji was *right there*, and it hadn’t chosen her. So she said the thing she had often told herself when she first learned of what happened to Kuina’s Blade. “Zoro has no right to that sword!”

“And who are you to determine that?”

It wasn’t said cruelly; it was simply a question. A part of Tashigi wanted it to be said with some sort of maliciousness so she could feel justified in her anger and yell – and not be the only emotional one in this conversation.

Even as she said it, Tashigi felt like the petty, snot-nosed child tattling to an adult about another child that had taken a toy that she wanted. It didn't help that her voice cracked on various words. "Uncle, do you know that he's a Pirate *and* he was a Bounty Hunter? He's using Wado for nefarious purposes! He's taking *everything* that the sword represents and dragging it through the mud!"

"You know how Named Blades are. If it didn't approve of how he uses it, it would have sought out a new owner already."

"I'm *going* to take it back from him." Tashigi determined, because denying that Wado would actually let itself be used in such a manner...it was somehow easier.

There was a tired sigh on the other end, followed by, *"I don't think that is wise, Tashigi. Zoro is..."* he didn't say it, *more skilled, much stronger*, but he didn't need to. *"He has a powerful sense of determination, and going up against him at your level...he won't kill you, but..."*

"So that's what this is about?! My skills?!"

"It's not about your skill; but rather your convictions. As someone who has studied Named Blades and someone who has trained in Sword's Spirit, you know how dangerous these things can be."

Tashigi sucked in a breath, not liking the truth of Koshiro's words. What was wrong with her convictions? What made Zoro's so different?!

Tashigi dared to ask the thing that had been bothering her ever since she learned of Koshiro giving Wado away. "Was it because I have Kuina's face and none of her skills?"

"Tashigi, no. It isn't like that, not at all. It's..." Koshiro sounded tired. She could understand, because they had talked about this topic in frustrating circles. But now, she had added something new to the conversation. *"What happened with Kuina will always be one of my biggest regrets. But that day...Zoro needed Wado Ichimonji."*

"People like *him* don't deserve swords like that." Tashigi said venomously, putting emphasis on certain words. "I'll reclaim Wado Ichimonji, along with every Named Blade that criminals like *Pirates* use."

"That would be unwise. Even if you could claim those swords, you know how selfish a Named Blade can be. Would you leave them to collect dust?"

You know what happened to those who got selfish and tried to collect the Blades – simply for bragging rights.”

Nasty Curses were reputed to be connected to Named Blades; a sword that while it wasn't necessarily alive, was in a way sentient. A Blade could turn on its owner if they came across an opponent with something the person wielding it didn't have but the sword liked.

There were stories of Nobles, Kings, Lords, even Pirates; those who made it their mission to collect the most infamous Named Blades simply because they wanted the prestige connected to them. To show off a rare collection that was a deadly conquest. To be able to brag about the opponents defeated.

But terrible things followed those who collected Named Blades and wouldn't or couldn't use them. It was said that entire once peaceful countries burned to the blood-soaked ground as the Blades sought out new owners amongst its conquerors. The Nobles who had the money to buy entire countries were soon no different than the starving peasants living on the streets. The Pirate Captains who built up a terrifying force that could rival countries – only to be taken down in a simple ocean storm, or a slaughter with rival Pirates.

Those who took on a Named Blade had to take into account that the sword liked to be *used*. Someone who trained in *Sword's Spirit* was able to hear the desires of a sword – or any bladed weapon really, if it had something regular swords didn't – such as a Name or a Curse attached to it. Those who trained in *Sword's Spirit* had a connection with their bladed weapons that was different from every other Swordsman.

Tashigi paused...Zoro had *three* swords; and all *three* of them were Named with one holding a Curse. It should be *impossible* for him of such a feat! It was insane! If Zoro knew *Sword's Spirit* then he would know how insanely dangerous that was! Did he have a death wish?! But... Sandai Kitetsu hadn't cut off his arm – and she could have sworn she felt amusement from the Blade at Zoro taking such a daring risk.

Getting back on track, Tashigi didn't want to think about what Zoro had done. This was about him and Wado!

“I won't be hoarding them, I have no intention of that!” Tashigi insisted, “There are a few hundred Marines who are incredibly skilled Swordsmen, and they have a strong sense of Justice. The swords won't be shoved somewhere to collect dust and rust!”

There was silence. Maybe she had convinced him of her position? Maybe he understood? Koshiro hadn't liked what the Marines stood for – yes, she knew that sometimes the Marines could be overzealous in carrying out what needed to be done, but – *surely* he'd understand? He hadn't verbally objected to her joining, but there had been the disapproving frown when she told him what she wanted to do after graduating his dojo, even if it was there just for a second.

She had proved she had a right to use Shigure, but it still wasn't Wado Ichimonji. Her mother had only been *somewhat* disappointed that it had been given away to someone who wasn't a blood-related family member. But Tashigi's mother's skills with a blade hadn't been inherited – all of that had gone to her older sister.

Maybe some deity out there knew that her mother wouldn't have any interest in swords and deemed it best to not let such a blessed gift go to waste. So her mother didn't really understand or care, why Wado Ichimonji being given away so casually was such a big deal.

Finally, Koshiro spoke, *“You have no right to claim how and where you think a Blade like that should be used. You know a Named Blade chooses their owner and will turn on those they deem no longer worthy. That its loyalty will change the moment it comes across someone who aligns with its interests.”* A beat of silence, then he added, *“Would you really sentence so many people to death?”*

It was why Mihawk could wield that bloodthirsty Black Blade so easily; even though he wasn't going around slaughtering innocent bystanders. He used the Blade, yes, but it was his spirit and skill the sword respected. It was said the Black Blade demanded blood, but Mihawk could hold the Blade back and not give in to its whims.

Anyone who willingly let a Blade control their actions were terrifying – and those who were unaware of the Blade controlling them...to be a puppet to your own sword was nothing short of nightmarish. Those who were controlled by their Blades were essentially addicted to the sword and bent to its every whim.

“While I'm not going to stop you as it isn't my place; I would advise you to truly consider what you are trying to do. Trying to claim a Named Blade simply because you personally don't like how it's being used isn't a strong enough reason for a Blade to turn against its wielder. Anyone who could have it taken away so easily doesn't deserve to wield such a sword in the first place.”

“Am I never going to be good enough?” Tashigi whispered, tears rolling down her face as doubt crashed down on her. “You personally trained me, so...what am I doing wrong?”

A heavy sigh, and from the sound on the other side of the phone, Tashigi wondered if Koshiro had removed his glasses to massage his eyes the way he did when he was trying to explain something.

“You need to reevaluate your goal – are you upset about how the Blades are being used, or who is wielding them? There are some Marines who will more than happily take on a Blade that thirsts for blood; they’ll suite each other perfectly.”

His tone was somewhat harsh and clearly disapproving. The Marines again – it was one thing of many it seemed, they couldn’t agree on. Koshiro could control his anger so infuriatingly easily, but she could hear it in his voice – but there was also something else; a commanding tone when he was trying to teach a difficult lesson.

Tashigi wanted to argue, but Koshiro wasn’t done.

“So I ask you, what is the difference between a Marine who claims that he’s upholding True Justice on a battlefield soaked with children’s blood and a Pirate who slaughters the innocent?”

“We...they have to do what’s necessary sometimes...” Tashigi argued weakly, but yet...she had asked herself that question often enough when she heard of the Marines’ exploits. It was *always* justified, somehow, and the Government patted themselves on the back for a job well-done.

“What about Ohara? Or Flevance? Because they wear a uniform they’re justified in the slaughtering of innocent thousands?”

Of course they were justified! The scholars of Ohara were trying to find out how they could utilize an Ancient Weapon to destroy the world. And as for Flevance, as unfortunate as it was, they couldn’t let a contagious disease run rampant. It *had* to be contained. But somehow, those arguments seemed so weak. If Tashigi did bring them up, Koshiro would find ways to refute them.

‘Look underneath the underneath,’ as he often said.

So she stayed silent.

Mostly.

sniff* *hiccup!

Koshiro sighed yet again, *“I should apologize...I shouldn’t pile my personal feelings about the Marines onto you, Tashigi. That’s not a responsibility you should bear. I need you to understand – not all Marines have the heart that you do; and they lack the convictions that is so desperately needed.”*

Koshiro was silent, for a moment. *“...I’m glad that you are among their ranks, Tashigi. The Marines – they – they need more people like you.”*

Tashigi was crying, because those words meant so much.

“I’m sorry that you didn’t get your chance with Wado Ichimonji, but – Zoro has a powerful sense of conviction and he’s carrying the weight of a promise to Kuina. I would not have given him that sword if I had any doubts of his abilities. You are certainly skilled in your own right and have incredible ambition that is to be admired. But if you were to go up against Zoro as you are now, you would lose.

“You may have to accept that Zoro isn’t the mountain you have to overcome. Your grandfather told me that when we reach our personal mountain, we’ll simply know it – and it all depends on how we respond once we reach it.”

It was a painful truth. And it was difficult to accept.

“You need to look at what you want and why – and determine how you are going to accomplish your goal. Please, Tashigi, I’m begging you...don’t repeat my mistakes.

“And Tashigi...you may still have a lot of growing to do, but you are an excellent Swordswoman. You would have made your grandfather proud. Even though we have our differences...I’m proud of you.”

Tashigi sucked in a breath, not expecting to hear that at all.

“Take care of yourself.”

click

Seeing as the snail had gone back to sleep, Tashigi hung up the receiver and just stared ahead at nothing. It was a bittersweet feeling.

Tashigi felt exhausted and defeated. One part of the conversation made her want to curl up into a ball in bed and just cry about the

unfairness of it all. Sometimes, talking to Uncle Koshiro was like a fount of wisdom and gushing about swords; other times, it was angrily debating i.e. arguing about the Marines and their brand of Justice. As long as their conversations stayed away from the Marines and the World Government, their chats were actually fairly pleasant.

But, it was different this time.

Maybe...maybe Tashigi would call him again – in a few months. Or maybe when she reclaimed Wado – just to say that she had done it. To have proven him wrong. She desperately wanted Zoro to be her mountain. But Zoro wouldn't even acknowledge her; and Wado hadn't even turned on him in her presence.

Tashigi felt exhausted. One part of her didn't feel as if she had accomplished a damn thing; while the other felt happy at Koshiro's words. Yet another was confused, because she didn't know how to feel about the possibility of Zoro *not* being her mountain to overcome.

Zoro had Kuina's sword – and he was carrying out her will, or whatever. But Kuina had been *her* cousin. Why hadn't she heard Wado? She was *right there* next to Wado Ichimonji *three* times, and it hadn't once made a sound the first two times.

The third time, though...as she thought about it...Wado Ichimonji had a happy, teasing hum in its undertones.

Tashigi covered her face with her hands as she began to cry, because the Blade that should have been hers when Kuina died had clearly claimed its owner; and would not let anything happen to him anytime soon.

Because...Zoro had had something special with Kuina that she apparently didn't. Zoro, who had been able to encourage her cousin in ways that Tashigi never did. Because Zoro had something special with Koshiro; who saw him as a family member. Because Wado had chosen Zoro over her, and with his skills...he wielded that precious Blade along with *two* other Named Blades, one of which was *Cursed*.

Because Tashigi was forced to face the reality that she was so far behind. She had advanced through the ranks in her training, and was praised. But yet...she couldn't help but compare herself to Zoro – some guy she had only heard of through letters and stories from her uncle and fellow students; and met for all of five minutes – and he had taken over aspects of her life; essentially replacing her.

The adults in her life – minus Koshiro – had always compared her to Kuina. It had annoyed her, yes. She was always having to play catch up with Kuina; because Kuina had set an example. Now, Tashigi was comparing herself to Zoro – and she hated it.

Why was it always all about Zoro?!

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She quickly made her way to the ladies room to wash her face, but even then...when she saw Smoker about twenty minutes later, he took one look at her and held nothing back.

“You look awful.” Smoker’s brows furrowed and he studied her. Puffy eyes and red nose; a clear sign of something emotional happening
“Are you *really* alright?”

“I...” Tashigi didn’t know what to say, if anything. This would probably come up, somehow, one day, one way or another. It would be best to tell him now, so that there wouldn’t be any surprises later.
“Can this stay just between us?”

Smoker nodded and motioned to go ahead.

Sigh. “Roronoa Zoro is my cousin.”

Smoker’s brows shot up, nearly disappearing into his hairline. His tone was incredulous as he asked, “*Phantom Blade* Roronoa Zoro?”

“Well, sort of – not by blood – my uncle adopted him, apparently.”
Tashigi’s tone showed clear resentment and anger, somewhat surprising Smoker; because he had never seen this side of her before.

Smoker sighed heavily as he collapsed into his desk chair. “Was there any indication of that in your records?”

“It was unofficially, I suppose. But I don’t know for sure.” Tashigi replied, determinedly fighting back more tears. “I didn’t know it was him...”

“That’s a good thing, then. Your ignorance can sometimes be your innocence in cases like this.” Smoker said, knowing that there was more of a story there. But he would ask later, and wouldn’t push it. “If Roronoa has joined forces with this Pirate...and depending on the actions that he takes, the Government may just start paying close attention to Crescent Island, or even you.”

The implications of that...it was well known the actions the Government had taken after Rodger's execution. If there was any suspected relation, no matter what the capacity, the Marines might find Tashigi guilty of treason with that fact alone. It made her scared and angry – because *what if* suddenly forced itself into her already strained thoughts.

“Do not tell *anyone* about your relation to Roronoa – I need to go take care of some paperwork before we go.”

“Didn't you already do so, Sir?” Tashigi questioned with confusion.

“This is last minute bullshit our hard-ass superiors will demand.” Smoker said as he slammed the door.

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Smoker lit two fresh cigars and puffed on them angrily. Smoker was a rather interesting member of the Marines. He had admired them from afar in his younger days; but he also had been in his fair share of bar fights and had seen the inside of a jail cell more than once.

So, while he was an upstanding member of the World Government's Navy Branch; he wasn't exactly an honest one. Smoker made his way to records, where he knew all the files for the recruits were kept. If he had to, it would be easy to smudge things on Tashigi's file. Just enough that it wouldn't be noticeable and no-one would question anything.

Tashigi and her uncle didn't share a last name, and she wasn't from the same island, so that was good. Smoker checked and double-checked everything pertaining to Tashigi's extended family – and fortunately, Chikuma Koshiro was all that the records stated he was; a widower who was the head of a dojo in East Blue.

There were more things; he seemed to have escaped Wano even after it had closed off its borders, and sadly, there was a deceased daughter – but nothing indicating that he had officially adopted Roronoa Zoro. There was no mention him. Smoker took in a relieved breath, and fortunately, his *Moku-Moku* fruit let him take in deep breaths of cigar smoke without the burning, sickening side effects to his lungs.

He returned the records to their place, and went to make sure that everything was ready for their voyage.

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: Kakashi: A Promising Team

An Author's Rambles:

There wasn't really much I could add with the others' adventures in Loguetown. The stuff with Tashigi will be important later. The relationship between Koshiro and Tashigi is an interesting one. Tashigi's drive to claim Wado is much stronger here; but sometimes, you have to learn to let things go. The plans you made for your life are hardly ever what you intended them to be. Smoker is more than willing to fudge a few records for Tashigi's sake if he has to. They shouldn't lose out on a decent Marine over a few familial connections.

Koshiro dislikes the Marines so much because they remind him of what he left behind in Konoha. Thus, why he's willing to help the Revolutionaries. He's worried about Tashigi becoming a child-killer like him; abandoning her allies for the sake of following the rules; or disgraced like Sakumo, or bitter and angry like Kakashi who resented the people around him.

Koshiro is genuinely trying to give Tashigi advice, but she has to get passed some of her own hurdles before she can truly understand. Koshiro isn't angry at Tashigi, he's angry at the Marines/WG and he can be a bit harsh when it comes to an organization like the Marines. He's still bitter about the Hatake family and Sakumo's team.

He's likely also frustrated with himself for not doing more, and he simply wants Tashigi to hear and actually listen. But Tashigi is stubborn and very driven. Sadly, the relationship between uncle and niece is somewhat strained in places.

About Hayabusa: a reference to Ryu Hayabusa in Ninja Gaiden. There was a reviewer who mentioned it, and I apologize that I can't remember who it was – but here's to you and thank you for your idea.

About living/sentient swords/bladed weapons:

You have a regular sword and then there are Named Blades: these are swords (or bladed weapons) that have been forged using none-traditional means/being wielded in violence/upholding – over time, the swords became sentient in their own way. When people put their heart and soul into their work, it can be quite literally.

Kusanagi is a legendary Japanese sword, and it often appears in media.

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Kuudere: Emotionless, cold, and distant. On the rare occasional that a kuudere does speak, they tend to be very blunt and cynical. A blank face and a flat voice is a must. Despite their icy nature,

kuudere characters are capable of caring and forming romantic bonds.

Kamidere: Arrogant, proud, and sporting a god complex. They believe everyone should treat them as divine beings, and will force their views on everyone.

Hinedere: Takes the icy nature of the kuudere and combines it with the arrogant attitude of the kamidere. Hinedere characters are very cynical and sarcastic, but will show their soft side when a character breaks through their shell. They are a new archetype and may see more popularity if the anime's cynical trend continues.

An Interlude of Sorts - Pt.4: A Promising Team – The Standards are met; the Will of Fire has a Spark

Chapter Summary

Kakashi is notorious for never passing the teams that come to him, and he's always been right to never pass them. But a team comes along that earns Kakashi's interest.

Chapter Notes

A slightly necessary chapter to sort of show what has been going on with Kakashi and the Elemental Nations some, because there's going to be future events. This was supposed to be an interlude chapter, but I wanted to add more and more, and now here we are with a sort-of actual chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The war against the Third Mizukage and his regime lasted for around a year-and-a-half; it was initially dealing with the man himself, and then the resulting aftermath. There were hundreds of people who still believed Arashi's lies about Kekkei Genkai holders, and so Mei and her followers weren't able to relax right away. Various Suna and Konohamin were often stationed to assist the Fourth Mizukage and her regime until things calmed down.

Kakashi had fought in the war for roughly ten months and a few days. He now had a few new scars; but those weren't too bad – though considering they were on his face, they were reminders of how close those strikes had come. It was only thanks to Obito's eye that he had managed to dodge. Even if the one Swordsman he had gone up against hadn't been amongst the infamous Seven, they were incredibly skilled.

When they weren't fighting a war against a madman, people were finding that Kakashi was a hard man to please; much to the frustration of the potential Genin, their parents, and the teachers who had deemed them ready for graduation. In between his time as an ANBU, Kakashi had failed each and every team that had been sent his way so far for the past few years; and the most frustrating thing about it according to the academy teachers, was that Kakashi was *always right*. Kakashi tested his potential teams on things such as teamwork;

practical reasoning skills; along with whether or not they would catch the lies or “see beneath the underneath”, especially with frayed nerves and teetering at the edge of their patience.

Unfortunately, with every team, the individuals fell under four categories:

They weren’t suited for the Shinobi life *at all* – it was nothing more than fanciful tales for those kids where fanboys and girls were harshly weeded out and shown the reality that they were better off living as civilians.

Or perhaps they were in fact a skilled fighter, but their teamwork was severely lacking – so they were better off in a class of ANBU that specialized in individuals going on solo missions – while rigorously being trained to work with others in the off chance that may be the case.

Then, there were those who were more than willing to turn against each other if it meant gaining an advantage. Kakashi had seen more than one friendship that had likely taken years of cultivating shatter beyond repair in a matter of moments because someone thought that they were doing the right thing by following the rules. They failed to see that rules which forced people to choose between self-advantage and the sacrifice of their comrades was nothing more than simple manipulation.

Finally, there were those who had better brains than the rest of their classmates – but their fighting skills were subpar. Those were the ones who went to work in the various Shinobi offices and records, while also being required to train and learn how to fight, but not to the extent that those who were on teams or going into ANBU were expected to.

It had become a running joke among his colleagues that Hiruzen was simply using Kakashi to weed out the individuals who weren’t suited for the Shinobi life. As a result, whenever Gai pestered Kakashi for some sort of challenge, he often got to listen to Kakashi complain about incompetent Genin. In turn, Kakashi got to hear Gai talk about his youthful students; mostly one Rock Lee who was showing incredible promise in spite of his inability to perform traditional Jutsu.

Gai gave an encouraging thumbs up and a sparkling grin. “Maybe this year you’ll get lucky with a youthful team, my rival.”

Kakashi sighed heavily as he made his way towards the classroom to meet his newest team, purposefully arriving a few (several) hours late. Kakashi opened the door and entered with a lazy hunch to his shoulders. There were only three people sitting in the classroom; as all the other teams had already been picked up earlier that morning.

He took in the sight of Inuzuka Kiba – who was a distant cousin however many times removed from somewhere on his mother’s side, a brooding boy named Aburame Shino, and an obviously shy girl named Hyuuga Hinata.

“You’re late!” Kiba shouted, pointing an accusing finger at Kakashi.

“Yes, well, I got lost on the path of life and decided to enjoy the view. It was very relaxing.” Kakashi casually shrugged, “...you should try it sometime.”

“As if...” Kiba didn’t believe such a blatant lie.

Shino cocked an eyebrow, trying to analyze what their sensei was saying. Was there some sort of code?

Hinata squeaked when Kakashi’s visible eye briefly glanced in her direction.

“Well, now that I’m here, let’s go up on the roof. You’re already late!”

Kakashi couldn’t help the grin of satisfaction that pulled at the corner of his lips at the incensed shout of Kiba,

“*LATE?! How the fuck are we the ones late?!*”

Kakashi just disappeared in a **poof** of smoke, leaving the three Genin to navigate which area of the roof he was talking about since there were various exits to different sections of the roof.

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“I can’t believe that guy,” Kiba muttered, and Akamaru barked in agreement. “First he shows up late, *now* he expects us to find him? What kind of teacher *does* that?”

“I believe he’s already testing us,” Shino said, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with Kiba. “Why? Because we’re not only tired, but it’s also passed our usual lunchtimes. He’s purposefully grating on our already worn nerves as an attempt to cause various levels of stress.

Quite likely to see how we respond.”

“Um” Hinata poked her fingers together and said quietly, “E-excuse me...W-w...we’re supposed to be a-a tracking t-team, r-right? D-don’t y-you think t-that’s why s-sensei is having u-us find him?”

Kiba stopped so abruptly and turned around to face his teammates; he gaped at Hinata, who ducked her head as if she had said something to insult him. Kiba slapped his forehead. “Dammit, *of course!*”

“A keen observation, Hinata-sama.” Shino nodded his approval. “I was about to suggest the same thing.”

“I-I think I can find h-him...” Hinata whispered. “*Byakugan!*”

Hinata found their sensei easily enough – most likely because he wanted to be found – and she led the boys towards the north exit on the third floor. Kakashi was casually sitting on the railing as he waited, reading an obnoxiously orange book. He didn’t even look up as they came out onto the roof.

“About time you three arrived.”

“You’re one to talk.” Kiba muttered bitterly, and Shino lightly elbowed the other boy in the side.

“Well, have a seat, all three of you.” Kakashi waved towards the stairs on the leveled deck, and the three hopeful Genin complied. “Why don’t you three introduce yourselves? I want to know who’s who.”

“Shouldn’t you already know who we are?” Kiba asked in a tired, near-sarcastic tone as he absentmindedly scratched Akamaru’s ear.

“I know that I already find you annoying.” Kakashi’s tone was ominously cheerful. The three simply stared at Kakashi with various stages of disbelief. That was a rather boring reaction... So he didn’t bother with putting that blatant smut book away. His voice took on a disinterested quality. “I don’t even know if you three are even worth my time. So do try to garner at least *some* of my interest.”

Kiba glared, Shino furrowed his eyebrows, and Hinata tried to make herself as small as possible.

“Pardon me, Sensei...but we don’t even know who you are...” Shino spoke carefully. Although, Shino did have his suspicions.

“Mah, that’s right...I haven’t introduced myself yet,” Kakashi said as if he had forgotten. “I’m Hatake Kakashi, your *possible* sensei. I like a lot of things. I dislike a lot of things. My hobbies are none of your business. My goal is to see an old friend again, someday. Your turn.”

Kiba rolled his eyes, and clearly wanted to say something, but Shino spoke up before Kiba could potentially put his foot in his mouth.

“I’m Aburame Shino. I like collecting and breeding insects, and my goal is to breed and be host of up to five various hives by the time I’m sixteen. My dream is to find the rarest insect in the world. I dislike pesticides and killing insects needlessly.”

A full two minutes of silence passed between them before the others realized Shino was done speaking.

“I’m Inuzuka Kiba. I like playing with Akamaru, eating food, and playing with my cousins. I wanna get really strong and learn all sorts of awesome Jutsu, and while I’m at it, maybe create some of my own! Become a strong Pack Leader, hell, maybe even become Hokage! I hate overpowering smells, weak people, studying, and rainy days.”

“I-I’m H-Hyuuga Hinata,” the girl squeaked. “I like flowers, and-and p-planting...flower pressing...cooking is nice, t-too. I-I find i-it relaxing...I-I want to p-prove m-myself worthy of h-heading...I-I mean, l-leading m-my Clan. M-my dream is t-to-to...ch-change h-how my...my Clan...” Hinata was slowly turning red out of embarrassment at having all of this attention on her. The others strained to hear her as she whispered a few more things that not even Kiba could pick up with his sensitive hearing from where he was sitting next to her and finished with, “...I want to m-make my fa-father proud.”

These three...had contradicting personalities that was for certain. From what Kakashi had read, the Inuzuka and Aburame kids were already friends, and had been since before their arrival at the academy, and worked well together. Hinata though... her inclusion would depend heavily on if the boys were willing to work with a third member; and if Hinata was willing to step up and not hide all the time. In spite of being a Hyuuga, she had numerous very unlike-Hyuuga tendencies, and it wasn’t even an act. Or at least, she was already very convincing.

“Well, I’ll see you at training field five at six o’ clock for your test tomorrow morning. Be sure not to eat anything, otherwise...” Kakashi’s voice turned ominous. “...You’ll throw up.” Then, with a

casual wave and a smile, “Bye~!”

Kakashi was gone in a **poof** of smoke yet again.

“What the hell?”

Shino frowned. “It doesn’t seem wise for us not to eat anything if the test is as rigorous as he claims. Why? Because we’ll all be tired *and* hungry; those things are not a good combination. He’s a Jonin, so he’ll definitely be pushing us to our limits.”

“...I-I can m-make food...” Hinata said quietly.

Kiba grinned at the prospect of food. “Awesome,”

“Perhaps before we go home, we should check out training field five – we can’t know whether or not he laid traps.”

Shino stood up, and looked expectantly at his teammates. A few insects were crawling across his face. Since they had been friends for so long, Kiba was used to it by now, and simply ignored the little creatures. Hinata stared. Although she had been aware of them, she hadn’t really seen the insects up this close before.

“Well, fine.” Kiba huffed. “So, what, you wanna lay traps of our own?”

“T-that would w-work.” Hinata said quietly as she stood as well. “M-my...I know how to-to...set t-traps...Hyuuga s-specialize in s-spotting them...and dis-dismantling.”

“That’s great, Hinata-chan!” Kiba cheered as he jumped up and gave her a friendly, light clap on the back. Hinata blushed and just nodded her head.

“Let’s work hard together.” Shino said. “Do you think we should discuss our strategies now, or when we reach the training field?”

“Psh, that’s boring!” Kiba scoffed. “Let’s just talk about it when we get there.”

Shino honestly would have preferred discussing their strategies early on, as he was always one to be prepared. As far as he could tell, it didn’t seem that Kakashi was following them. But it was always best to exercise caution.

Kiba put Akamaru in his usual spot on his head, and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He then turned and grinned at Hinata, a bit happy that

he had a solid excuse for talking to her. Hinata had always blended into the background. Whenever Kiba tried to talk to her back at the academy, she always murmured some sort of barely legible response and would never look at him when he spoke.

She never really looked at Shino when he spoke either; always preferring to look at the ground instead. Kiba did plenty of talking for Hinata and Shino combined, so he talked away. Sometimes, Shino offered his own input or correction.

Every now and then, one of the boys would ask Hinata something, and she always felt surprised when they asked her opinion on something. Or they asked her something that required a “yes” or “no” answer. Being included was a rare thing, and made her feel nervous and tongue-tied. Both Shino and Kiba waited for her to stutter out some sort of response, and then went back to the conversation.

Hinata glanced up, studying her teammates. Kiba really had a brash nature; but he had always been kind to her. Shino was stoic, and seemed to hold Kiba back from doing something foolish. In fact, as they were walking, Kiba would walk backwards excitedly talking about something; Shino seemed to reach out as if it were second nature and pull Kiba out of someone’s path – or stop him from tripping over the signs and displays the stores had put out.

Both of them were nice – and from what she saw of what they could do back at the academy, Hinata hoped that she could keep up with them.

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Kiba, Hinata, and Shino all arrived at training field five half an hour before six the next day to make sure that their traps were still set and that nothing new had been added without their knowledge. After checking that everything was still in place, the team settled down to eat a little something really quick.

“Wow, Hinata, this is so good!” Kiba praised Hinata’s home-made food.

Shino agreed with a simple, “Hmm.”

“T-thank you, Kiba-kun, Shino-kun...” Hinata smiled.

Six o’ clock came and went; the sun was high in the sky, and now the kids were extremely bored. But none of them dared to sleep because a

trap could be sprung at any moment. As Shino put it, “A Shinobi has to be prepared” so Hinata and Shino alternated on surveillance.

It was just passed noon when Kakashi *finally* arrived, much to the chagrin of Kiba who yelled and cursed.

Kakashi’s reason for being late was, “There was an old lady who needed help with her shopping, and because I was going to be at the store anyway, I figured I’d get the shopping I needed done.” Kakashi held up a bag of groceries just before he began taking the items out of the bag. He began placing the items on a nearby stump. “It was then I realized I had several other errands to take care of and decided to do them before I forgot again.”

Kiba looked skeptical. He whispered to his teammates, “Wait, so the shopping thing *was* true?”

“Here are some fresh bento for our lunch.”

Except, the others were quick to notice: there were only two lunch boxes.

“W-excuse me, sensei...” Hinata nervously spoke up. “T-there’s only two b-bento...”

She didn’t really want to speak anymore, and hoped that what she did say was enough.

“Very astute, Hinata-chan,” Kakashi said as he placed a time clock next to the lunches. He then pulled two small bells from his pocket. “The rules are simple: for everyone who gets a bell, you pass, and you also get to eat lunch. But... if you don’t get a bell; you won’t pass, you won’t be eating lunch, you’ll get tied to that stake and watch everyone else eat, and finally...you’ll have to go back to the academy.”

Shino didn’t really like how that sounded. It sounded far too suspicious – there had to be a catch.

“Can he-can he do that?” Kiba asked, looking irritated. Akamaru cocked his head and whined.

“The Hokage likes to use me to weed out those who aren’t meant for the Shinobi life, bothersome as it is. You should know I’ve yet to pass anyone for the past year or so.” Kakashi stated as he tied the bells to his belt loop. Looking very serious, Kakashi’s visible eye glared down at the three kids before him. “I want you to fight me as if you’re trying

to kill me. You better get ready.”

“K-kill you?!” Hinata looked panicked.

“What? Now--?” Kiba started, but was cut off when Kakashi rushed at him because he was the closer target. Hinata and Shino jumped up and widened the distance between them and their potential sensei.

Kiba cursed because none of them were really ready. He narrowly dodged getting kicked in the stomach, but Kakashi was able to evaluate and redirect easily enough that he instead punched Kiba in the face, sending him crashing to the ground.

“A Shinobi is *always* ready; they *never* let their guard down.” Kakashi said factually, drawing a leg back to kick Kiba in the stomach or ribs. “Even in seemingly casual settings.”

Several shuriken shot at Kakashi from one side, while several insects got between him and Kiba. Shino was at Kiba’s side and he grabbed his friend’s arm and dragged him off.

“Hinata-sama, let’s go!” Shino called out, just loud enough to where he wasn’t shouting. Hinata and Akamaru followed both boys closely, and they ran into the surrounding forest for cover and to evaluate their situation.

“Damn, he hit hard...” Kiba complained as he rubbed his sore jaw. “Hinata, what’s he doing now?”

“*Byakugan!* He’s...” Hinata frowned in confusion. “...r-reading a book?”

“What?” Kiba asked disbelievingly.

“He’s just standing there, reading that book...”

“He’s clearly trying to throw us off our rhythm.” Shino observed. “First, he arrives late; long past the meeting time that *he* set; knowing we’d be tired and irritable. We probably would have been playing by his rules had we not eaten anything...”

“Then, he attacks us when we aren’t prepared, then makes it look like he’s either disregarding us or not taking us seriously as a threat. The book’s a typical tactic. Why? Because it’s an annoyance to not be taken seriously when given a serious task, naturally to make us even more frustrated.”

"I've heard from my mom that Kakashi's particularly good at yanking people's chains in more ways than one..." Kiba glared in Kakashi's direction. His irritation tactics were working, alright.

"Hmm..." Shino agreed.

"...h-he hasn't m-moved." Hinata whispered nervously. "Do-do you think h-he's waiting for us? W-what-what if he's c-coming fro-from somewhere e-else?"

"Yes." Shino nodded. "If the task is to get the bells...then all of us will have to work together. I believe that's the *real* point of this test. Why? It's not about *who* gets the bells – it's working as a cohesive unit for an end goal."

"I...I could probably get-get in close with m-my family's f-fighting style...though I-I'm n-not very good at it."

"My allies could serve as a distraction to give you the opening you need, along with using them to grab the bells."

"I've got my Fang Jutsu..." Kiba muttered thoughtfully as he chewed on his thumbnail. "What if... nah, it probably wouldn't work..."

"What?" Shino inquired.

"Well..." Kiba looked at his teammates, "Hinata's family has some pretty impressive fighting skills, so Kakashi would look out for her if she got too close, right? So even if your Taijutsu isn't *that* good, Kakashi-sensei might think you're trying to throw him off or somethin'."

"I see." Shino nodded thoughtfully, understanding what Kiba was getting at. "Perhaps Hinata-sama could be the distraction; we'll act as if you are trying to draw attention away from her, while I close in with my allies."

"What do you think, Hinata?" Kiba asked, and Hinata blushed at suddenly having the attention on her.

"I..." Hinata fidgeted. Her opinion wasn't often one to be regarded. "I think w-we could ma-make it work...um," she fidgeted some more, and Shino nodded to encourage her to continue. "What-what if some o-of your bugs were on me? Sensei w-would focus on dodging, so he might not...realize that...if a few of the bugs got on him..."

“Yes, that could work.” Shino said. Several insects flew over to Hinata, and she visibly tried not to shiver. More insects even landed on Kiba, and he didn’t blink an eye – obviously very used to the Aburame Clan’s allies. “I also have several trackers in my hive, so we should be able to distinguish which one is our own if we get separated.”

Shino looked to Hinata, “I’ll leave some of my allies with you; can you feel how they’re buzzing right now?” Hinata nodded, noticeably trying not to look uncomfortable. “That means they’re close to their hive-mates. If we get separated and you run into either Kiba or I, and they don’t buzz, that means it’s not one of us who’s with you.”

Hinata smiled a little. “That’s useful.”

“Yes, it is.”

Their group turned their attention back to Kakashi, who still hadn’t moved.

“Alright...” Shino took over, and he motioned to the other two. “Here’s how we’ll carry out our plan...”

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Kakashi raised a brow when he saw the three kids (plus one dog) line up as they exited from their hiding place.

“We’re gonna kick your ass and take those bells!” Kiba shouted with a smirk.

“Aru!” Akamaru agreed.

Kiba charged forward with a shout, and Akamaru was at his heel. He reared back a hand in preparation to strike, and Kakashi easily dodged such an obvious attack. He grabbed Kiba’s wrist and flipped Kiba onto his back. At the moment of impact, Kiba exploded with an accompanying flash bang – along with sending several shuriken outwards.

Kakashi was just able to shield his eye, when Hinata closed in, her Byakugan activated. Kakashi quickly blocked one of her strikes; and Akamaru snarled as he charged forward and sprung up from the ground. Akamaru managed to tear Kakashi’s sleeve, and Hinata sprung away, landing on all fours in a very distinctive fashion.

“Good job, Akamaru!” ‘Hinata’ said with Kiba’s voice – with a poof of

white smoke, Kiba was crouched on the ground – while Shino charged forward. Akamaru also transformed into another Kiba.

“Jūjin Taijutsu Ōgi: Gatsūga!”

Kakashi quickly dodged, having a few close calls. It seemed that neither Kiba nor Akamaru could control where their strikes would land. If they wanted to have a better success rate, that would take *a lot* of training.

He didn’t really bother to put down his book.

Though – he turned to look when Kiba’s finger tapped one of the bells.

While Kiba and his canine partner were attacking, Kakashi blocked several strikes from Shino – only to realize that it was Hinata. He punched Hinata on the stomach – not too hard, but hard enough that she was immediately winded and dropped the henge. Very interesting – where was Shino? Kakashi quickly widened the distance between himself, Hinata and Kiba.

“Hinata!” Kiba looked as if he wanted to run to her, but she shook her head and forced herself to stand.

Both of them ran after him as he sort of jump-skipped backwards. Kakashi chuckled, this was a really good part! He heard buzzing, and several insects flew between him and the other two. Shino charged up from behind, and ducked low at the last minute when Kakashi swung around in an attempt to clothesline the kid. It was close enough that Kakashi had brushed the tips of Shino’s hair with his arm. Shino then sprung up with a kunai in hand, trying to strike for the bells, of course. Except Kakashi continued in a spinning motion and slapped Shino across the face with his book and jostled his glasses.

Shino immediately winced at the unwelcome sunlight that hit his eyes and he pulled back. He could have kicked himself! Shino cursed under his breath for not reacting in a way that would have either ensured victory or at least gotten them closer to getting a bell. Being temporarily blinded wasn’t good, and Shino quickly backed away, using his allies as cover.

Hinata took a deep breath and ran through the cover of insects, and struck Kakashi – except he exploded in a poof of smoke and a log was in his place.

“Thank you, Hinata-sama,” Shino said, thankfully already mostly

recovered. He could still see a few spots dancing in front of his eyes, but it wasn't as bad as before.

"He's over here!" Kiba called out as he charged at Kakashi with a roar of frustration.

"Kiba-kun, look out!" Hinata called the moment she saw it – except it was too late.

A flash bang went off, and Kiba cried out as his vision blurred. Kakashi flipped behind Kiba and got into position with a certain hand sign.

"That's a Fire Jutsu!" Shino realized. Was Kakashi *actually* going to use such an extreme attack on them?

"Kiba-kun, you have to *move!*" Hinata yelled as she ran at Kakashi fully intending to strike wherever she could.

"Konohagakure Hiden Taijutsu Ogi: Sennen Goroshi!"

Kiba yelled out in shock and protest when Kakashi poked – *no* – more like *jammed* his fingers into – Kiba was blushing furiously. That was a childish prank! Except it was *so much worse!*

Hinata skidded to a stop because she was so taken aback. She turned tomato red as her eyes widened.

Kakashi widened the distance between them again, enjoying his book once more. Oh? What was this? Kakashi realized that he had several insect companions. That was actually pretty clever. They had had plenty of opportunities to transfer the insects and they had utilized them.

Meanwhile...

"I feel so violated!" Kiba wailed.

"Hn. That's very unfortunate." Shino replied.

"Don't you *dare* laugh at me!" Kiba accused, blush on his cheeks. This only caused Shino to do a sort of smirk that was ever so subtle – but Kiba noticed and was even more incensed.

"Sen-sensei is-is..." Hinata stuttered out, her blush even worse than Kiba's, "I c-ca...can't b-b-believe he did such a thing!"

“I’m gonna kick that perverted bastard’s ass!”

“Kiba-kun, don’t rush forward...thoughtlessly...” Shino tried to say, but simply released a quiet sigh when Kiba didn’t listen.

Kakashi lazily dodged the now messy strikes Kiba was doing – and sometimes he blocked – but *still*, he never looked away from his book. He wasn’t even really using any Jutsu against them...

It wouldn’t do to have Kiba on his own.

Shino got Hinata’s attention; who honestly still looked very red.

“Get sensei three meters to the right that way.” Shino quickly directed. “My allies will aid you where they can while I go for the bells.”

Taking a deep breath but still very much blushing, Hinata nodded and activated her Byakugan again.

Kiba and Akamaru were both getting clearly frustrated. Kakashi was simply hopping around and not really paying them any mind. Unexpectedly, he reached forward and grabbed Kiba’s hood and pulled it over his face before shoving Kiba face-first into the ground.

Kiba quickly reached up and grabbed Kakashi’s wrist in an attempt to slow him down or at least do *something* so that the others could get the bells. At that moment, Hinata, who was surrounded by several insects leapt over Kiba and barely just managed to strike Kakashi’s shoulder.

The successful strike was really thanks to Kiba being a stubborn kid and holding on, and the insects draining his chakra, making dodging only slightly more difficult. Kakashi was to some extent impressed. It was off by just a few centimeters, but it had stung – temporarily feeling as if his arm were asleep. He went through a series of hand signs,

“Katon: Gōkakyū no Jutsu!”

A fireball roughly the size of Kakashi’s head shot out of his mouth towards Hinata and the insects surrounding her. Kakashi had only put a small amount of chakra into the attack, but it was enough to make her back off – only a little.

Hinata glared and charged forward, doing her best to strike. There was something determined in her expression just then as she actually

bared her teeth and came close to successfully hitting Kakashi's chakra points a few times.

Shino then came behind Kakashi looking very annoyed, with his kunai in hand. Kakashi caught Shino's wrist and threw him at Hinata as he dodged. When Kakashi's foot hit the ground, there was a click.

"Hm?" Kakashi started to say when the explosion went off.

Kakashi shunshined away in time, and when he casually landed on a nearby tree. Just then, Kakashi noticed the trip wire – and he quickly had to dodge several kunai and shuriken. Once Kakashi was on the ground again, he noticed something. He tapped his hip.

"What's this...?" he no longer had the bells. His belt loop had been chewed through – and the beetles quickly flew away, now that their task was complete.

At that moment, the alarm went off.

Shino was holding both bells in his palm before he sunk to the ground muttering darkly, "My allies...my poor allies...all burned..."

"Eh? Shino-kun?" Hinata said worriedly. She would swear that there were dark clouds hovering over the Aburame.

"Wow, that's awesome, Shino!" Kiba praised.

"Very impressive." Kakashi clapped as he strolled up to them. "Now, I'll evaluate your performance."

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"Since the task was for more than one person to get a bell, I'm afraid only Shino-kun passes, because he got both at once."

"What?" Shino furrowed his brow. "We were...just supposed to work together, right? The bells...that...was the goal..."

Hinata curled into herself even more as she heard the words, and Kiba glared.

"That means Shino-kun can pick who his partner is going to be, and who is returning to the academy. Choose well, Shino-kun."

"*WHAT?!*" Kiba bellowed. "You *can't* be serious!"

“Oh? But I am. The rules were that if no-one got the bells, than you’d be going back to the academy. And unfortunately, neither you nor Hinata-chan got a bell.” Annoyingly, Kakashi turned to Shino and made a motion as if to hurry him up. “Well, Shino-kun? We’re waiting. If you want my recommendation, I would go for Hinata-chan. *She* was the one who helped you get both bells after all. Kiba-kun charged in a little too thoughtlessly for my taste.”

“B-but...no...” Hinata started crying. “You...I-I can’t...”

Shino looked from Kakashi to his teammates and back, an expression of clear disapproval on his face. He looked as if he were trying to properly form a reasonable response.

“But...” Kiba started, glancing helplessly between his team members and Kakashi. “There’s only *two* bells!” his eyes widened in grim realization. “There’s no way *all* of us could have got one!”

“True. Anyway, it’s been a long day, and all of us are tired. Perhaps if you discuss it among yourselves on who you think should stay and who should go, we can all leave.”

Hinata started crying even harder now, even though she uselessly fought to hold the tears back. “I’m sorry...I-I’m sorry, Kiba-kun, Shino-kun... Kakashi-sensei’s wrong... *I’m* h-holding you back...”

Kiba hated the defeated tone in Hinata’s voice. She was shy, quiet, always nice to everyone, and Akamaru liked her pretty much within minutes of meeting her – so that spoke levels about her character. Dogs could tell a lot about people.

He also hated how Hinata was talking about herself just then. She had been pretty awesome!

“No way, *I’ll* go back,” Kiba started saying, but Shino put a hand on Kiba’s shoulder to settle him.

Shino fiddled with the bells. Pettily, he dropped the bells on the ground. “I’ll remain with my teammates; even if we have to return to the academy.”

“You three...” Kakashi’s mask hid his smile, amused at the tense and infuriated expressions on the kids’ faces. “...pass.”

“WHAT?!” Kiba of course.

Shino's brow ever so subtly rose.

Hinata's head shot up so fast it was impressive that she didn't topple over.

Kakashi sighed internally as he realized Kiba seemed to shout a lot. But he could work with that.

"Shino-kun was right. This was an attempt to divide you and turn you against each other." Kakashi picked up the bell. "Enemies will try and do that to you in the field, don't ever let them succeed. I wanted to test your resolve, as well. Would you work together for an end goal? Would you be willing to leave a team member behind, even if it went against the rules or benefited you? I want you three to remember: people who break the rules are trash; but those who abandon their friends are *worse* than trash."

Kakashi walked over and picked up the bells. "All of you already display a promising amount of teamwork, it just needs to be refined – I'll be sure to work on that with you."

Kakashi pocketed the bells and pulled out a scroll from which he Unsealed a third bento, which he handed to Hinata.

"Huh?" Hinata looked from the bento to Kakashi and then to her teammates.

"All of you definitely can work either as a group or a pair, but Kiba-kun, you shouldn't rush in so recklessly no matter how much your opponent annoys you – even if it's part of a crazy plan to slow them down. That can get you and your teammates killed. Hinata-chan, your Taijutsu needs some refining and you have a tendency to hesitate. Shino-kun, you definitely have what it takes to be a leader – I think you would do very well with expanding your skillset..."

Kakashi motioned to the other bento on the stump, "Eat up, all of you. You deserve it. We'll start missions tomorrow, so meet me in front of the mission office at eight-thirty."

The three kids all blinked at Kakashi owlishly as he left in a whirlwind of leaves.

"We passed?" Kiba could barely believe it.

"Aru?" Akamaru whined.

“It would seem so.” Shino said.

Hinata just stared, not knowing what to say. Today had been emotional, that was for sure. But, she smiled, hiding the expression behind her high collar. She was on a team! Her father would be proud...hopefully.

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Kakashi briefly stopped by the academy to drop off a scroll that made Team 8 official. Iruka looked surprised and far too relieved and pleased at this news.

“About time, isn’t it, Kakashi-san?” Iruka asked with a smile.

Kakashi merely shrugged. “They worked well together.”

Afterwards, there was a brief stop by the Memorial Stone to tell Obito and Rin the good news. Thinking of Zoro, Naruto, and that Gaara kid being out there somewhere in the world...Kakashi wondered how they were doing.

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Kiba raced home, and very nearly ran into a vendor when he took a shortcut down one of the side paths.

“Hey, watch it!” the vendor shouted, quickly raising his box of cabbages up so that they wouldn’t be knocked out of his hands.

It was only thanks to Kiba ducking down and spinning on his heel that he didn’t send the vegetables flying everywhere. Akamaru yipped, as a reminder for Kiba to be careful.

Kiba burst through the gates of his home, and at that moment, Tsume and Hana were coming from the kennels.

Tsume was the first to speak. “Kiba? How’d it go?”

Instead of answering right away, Kiba slammed into his mother – nearly knocking Akamaru off in the process – and wrapped his arms around her in a tight hug. Tsume only smiled, figuring she knew what the news was based on this reaction.

Kiba seemed to realize what he was doing; he was a man now, and men didn’t hug their mothers like this! He blushed and pulled away. Stuffing one hand in his pocket and scratching the back of his head

with the other, Kiba said quietly,

“I did it mom, I’m on a team.”

Hana whooped and the Haimaru Brothers howled. Tsume threw her arm around Kiba to ruffle his hair.

Hearing the commotion, other Clan members came to see what was going on.

“My youngest pup’s an official Genin!” Tsume called out, still holding onto Kiba.

His Clan members whooped and hollered. Everyone came up to either ruffle Kiba’s hair, and either slap or punch his arms and shoulders.

“I’ll have to make a feast fit for the Hokage to celebrate!” one of his aunts said joyfully.

“Who’s on your team?” one cousin asked.

“Who’s your sensei?” an uncle inquired.

“Shino and Hyuuga Hinata, and Hatake Kakashi is my sensei.”

Tsume stared at Kiba. “That crazy scarecrow *actually* passed you?”

“Yeah...?”

Tsume pulled Kiba into another hug as she cried. “I’m so proud of you, Kiba!”

“Mom! ...Can’t...breathe!” Kiba huffed.

Tsume smiled apologetically and released her son.

Everyone was whooping and howling at the news. Kakashi was notorious for not passing any teams. Those kids must have done something that impressed Kakashi.

“Tell us about it over dinner!” Hana said, pulling a grateful Kiba towards the house.

The smell of different foods permeated throughout the entire house. Even the dogs were given large hunks of meat on bone to celebrate. Kiba excitedly retold events; about Kakashi’s bell test, and why he had passed them. Leaving out that one embarrassing part, of course.

Kiba was far too young to drink, but his great-uncle poured him a small cup of sweet sake – just one – and Kiba made a variety of expressions as the alcohol went down. It slightly burned and made him feel somewhat lightheaded. He had no idea why people enjoyed drinking the stuff. His relatives laughed, with a few commenting that he'll enjoy the "good stuff" when he's older.

Kiba went to bed that night exhausted; but his belly was full and he was content.

"We're gonna make a name for ourselves, Akamaru..." Kiba whispered tiredly as he snuggled into bed. Akamaru let out a yip, and then settled himself behind Kiba's legs.

There were a lot of things Kiba certainly wanted out of life. He wanted to make his mother proud, that was for sure. He wanted to somehow separate himself from Hana, who as the eldest, would inherit the Clan. Kiba loved his pack; it was a natural thing as an Inuzuka. But Kiba wanted to do something that Hana hadn't already done first.

He was among the first to impress a guy like Kakashi – his mom told Kiba a lot of stories of her experiences with him.

Maybe...

That was a start.

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Shino calmly walked through the gates to his Clan estate. His parents, along with a few aunts and uncles were gathered around some of the hives. His mother was the first to notice his presence as he approached. She turned around and gave a small smile.

His mother, Tonbo, greeted, "Shino."

Shibi merely nodded his usual silent greeting.

"Mother, Father." Shino greeted back, "I am pleased to inform you that I have been officially placed on a team with Inuzuka Kiba and Hyuuga Hinata. Our sensei is Hatake Kakashi."

"That's wonderful news." Tonbo said, her smile widened ever so slightly.

"I'm very proud of you, Shino." Shibi said as he placed a hand on

Shino's shoulder.

"We should celebrate," suggested one of the other Clan members.

"Why? It is a momentous occasion for Shino-san."

"I agree," Tonbo nodded. "I will gift you a second hive, Shino – one of your choosing. We can begin the process tonight after we finish celebrating. A much needed rest is often required after taking in a new hive, anyway."

"Such a wonderful thing," an aunt said, giving him a gentle side-hug. "I have worked alongside Hatake-san in the past – he is notoriously a difficult man to please. You must have done very well."

Shino smiled, a little. It was a rare expression to see on his face; the Aburame weren't really known for openly showing emotion.

One of his cousins gifted Shino a set of their customized kunai. An uncle gave him a new pair of sunglasses – which was a good thing, since the ones he was wearing now were slightly cracked and crooked. His grandfather promised that he would teach Shino a few of their Clan's Jutsu once Shino had a day off from any missions his sensei required of him.

The party wasn't really a loud one; most Aburame disliked loud noises. But it was mostly pleasant conversation. When Shino's relatives spoke of his sensei; it by and large seemed to come out as warnings. Kakashi was an eccentric man, Shino was already well aware of that fact. What he and his team had witnessed was but a tame preview.

Kakashi had many ways of getting under his opponent's skin – something Shibi believed Shino could learn from.

Later that evening, Tonbo and Shibi stood by while Shino selected a second hive. His first one was a type of beetle. After carefully considering all the pros and cons of the various available hives, Shino settled on one of the specially-bred bees. They were of a smaller variety; they were a beautiful shiny blue, and traditionally didn't sting. But the ones the Aburame Clan had been breeding not only pollinated, but had a stinger that would slowly paralyze the victim. The sudden loss of sensation in a limb could throw someone off and give an opening to strike.

Shino laid in his room quietly, listening to the two hives slowly acclimate to each other while the new hive adjusted to his chakra.

There were a lot of things Shino wanted out of the life he was given, but obtaining those things was a matter of feasibility. He had stated before one of his goals was to find the rarest one of insects in the world. But in order to do that, he would more than likely only be able to do so if he was doing it for the sake of the village or his Clan. Simply leaving would be seen as traitorous and traveling to other countries without a solid enough reason could get a person killed. ‘Searching for rare insects’ sounded like a lame excuse, even to Shino.

He was an only child and his mother couldn’t bear any more children due to an injury while she had been on a mission. That meant Shino would have to marry a woman who could become the Clan Head when he came of age.

What he wanted and what the village and his Clan needed were two entirely different things. Shino massaged his temples. This was too much to think about when he needed to sleep. On the bright side, the Aburame acted just lethargic enough most of the time that no-one would question it if he showed up exhausted the next day.

Kiba *might* notice – but then Shino could just tell him he now had a second hive and was still getting used to them. Then Kiba would get excited and would get distracted from Shino’s tiredness and would just assume it to be that and not ask too many questions.

While most people found the sounds of buzzing and crawling torturous and nightmarish, it was relaxing to Shino. It was simply another one of those things that separated the Aburame from everyone else. He had heard all the rumors in the village and even in the academy that his Clan practiced scaphism on any unfortunate soul who crossed them.

Well...Shino *did* have a few relatives who worked in T&I, so maybe those claims weren’t entirely unfounded.

He finally fell asleep not long after; his allies already getting along.

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Hinata made her way home that day in high spirits. She was on a team! Hinata was proud of herself. She entered the Clan compound and one of the servants – a cousin or an aunt, she wasn’t sure – was waiting for her.

“Your father wishes to see you to learn the results of your team placement, Hinata-sama.”

“O-oh...o-of course...” Hinata said quietly. Her happy mood plummeted.

She hastily (but still very politely and quietly) walked to the tea room, where her father was waiting. The *shoji* doors to the elegantly kept gardens were open, and Hiashi was sitting there, ramrod straight. He had tea on a small tray next to him, and he didn’t even bother to turn his head as Hinata entered.

Hinata bowed, and waited to be acknowledged.

“Were you placed on a team?” was all Hiashi asked.

“Y-yes, sir...”

“Who are your teammates and who is your sensei?”

“I-Inuzuka Kiba-san a-and A-Aburame Shino-san are-are m-my teammates, and Hatake K-Kakashi-sensei is my...” Hinata whispered and let her voice trail off.

Hiashi made an expression that Hinata couldn’t read.

Quite frankly, Hiashi was surprised that Kakashi would even pass his daughter. While he didn’t mind the Aburame boy too much, Tsume’s brood was known for being loud and messy, no matter what they were doing.

“Very well. I will inform your sensei not to interfere with your gentle-fist training.”

Hinata only nodded and didn’t move from her spot where she sat on the floor.

Hiashi still didn’t turn his head. His voice had a sense of exasperation to it as he added, “That will be all.”

More than thankful for the dismissal, Hinata quickly bowed, and left the room.

Hinata tried to control her breathing as her heart threatened to beat out of her chest. Talking to her father was always far too stressful and intimidating. She braced herself against the wall with a hand, and held the other over her chest.

A cool voice greeted, “Hinata-sama.”

“N-Neji-nii-san...” Hinata started, but she looked at his eyes and could see the anger in them, no matter how well he tried to hide it. She knew that Neji hated her, ever since her uncle, his father... Hinata quickly turned away and muttered an awkward, “G-good-bye...”

Neji stared after her, his eyes narrowed. She was so weak, in so many ways. And she was supposed to be their Clan Head. Clenching his fists determinedly, Neji was ever so careful with his thoughts as he hoped that that Fate would be kind just this once; and allow him to face Hinata one day so that he could prove his worth to the Head Clan. That just because he was born into the Branch Clan didn't mean he should be disregarded.

Hinata retreated to her room for a moment to grab a change of clothes before making her way to the bath to clean off the sweat and grime.

She sat in the bathtub with the water as hot as she could withstand, and sunk down so that it was to her chin. Hinata sighed heavily; trying to release all the stress and pent-up energy in her heart.

Everything was just so conflicting. Hinata didn't want to beat Hanabi in their spars; otherwise, Hanabi would receive that Cursed Seal. Hinata didn't want to put her sister through that – she *couldn't*. She didn't want Hanabi to be controlled; and she didn't want Hanabi to hate her like Neji did. Hinata didn't think she could take it.

So Hinata acted just incapable enough so that Hanabi would win some of their bouts; but not enough that Hinata would be the one to receive the Seal. She hoped her father wouldn't see through the act – or at least, hoped he wouldn't act on it if he even did know. Maybe he was waiting for something.

One day, Hinata determined, she would be strong. She would become the Head of her Clan, and she would do it proud. She would change the Caged Bird Seal, *somehow*. She hated that name so much – despised it in fact. It was far too cruel a thing to do to someone. Maybe there was a way to still protect their eyes, but not make it so Clan Heads could control aspects of the Branch Clan.

She would show her father how strong she wanted to be; the Branch Clans wouldn't have to live in fear and servitude to the Head Clan; things would be a good, wonderful sort of different. She and Neji would get along again. Hanabi would receive an improved version of the Caged Bird Seal, if at all.

Things would be fine.

At least, that was what she wanted, ever so desperately.

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There was a fairly large district in Konoha where all the Shinobi liked to hang out at night; it was mostly for drinking, telling war stories, reminiscing about former comrades long-gone, and drunkenly rambling about current problems.

Gai was crying about one of his students; while Kakashi pretended to listen – only offering the occasional and very unenthusiastic “uh-huh” and “is that so”.

“Lee works so hard, he has incredible youth and I’m so proud and...” Gai went off into drunken nonsensical rambles. This was the fifth time he was telling this story within the few hours that he and Kakashi had been there.

Kakashi had heard this story plenty of times within the months of Gai getting his own team. Kakashi reached for his drink but paused when he noticed how there was a sudden, sort of awkward silence that filled the bar – before harsh whispers took its place. Something was going on.

“Hatake-san.”

“Mah, Hyuuga-kun!” Kakashi greeted the other man as if they were old friends. Hiashi narrowed his eyes and frowned at Kakashi’s casual greeting, but Kakashi didn’t really care. “What a pleasant surprise to see you here!”

This was honestly the last place anyone thought they would see a Hyuuga; much less the Clan Head. If a Hyuuga showed up, it was usually because their team decided to have a fun night out. And usually, those people were from the Branch Clan. In fact – there were a few Branch Clan Hyuuga here already – and they tried to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible.

“I need to speak with you.” Hiashi stood in a way that showed he fully expected Kakashi to follow him.

“Are you trying to kidnap my youthful rival?!” Gai drunkenly demanded as he shakily stood up into a strange fighting stance.

Kakashi patted Gai on the shoulder. “I’ll be sure to cry for help if he tries anything, Gai-kun.”

“Good! There’s enough of him for the both of us to fight at least two!” Gai clenched his fist. “If I lose, I’ll run around the village one-no-two *hundred* times on my hands, blindfolded! Wearing weights!”

“...Maybe you should cut him off...” Kakashi said to the bartender.

“He only had half a beer,” the bartender exasperatedly replied.

“So he did...” Kakashi gave Gai another pat, then followed after Hiashi.

They stood off to the side a little in one of the alleyways. Hiashi looked rather annoyed at having to stand much less breathe the air in such a place.

“I want to talk to you about my daughter, Hinata.” Hiashi said very plainly. “I don’t want you to interfere with her training too much, because she is learning the Hyuuga’s signature style – and she’s struggling enough with that as it is. There is not much that can be expected of her, but you can at least teach her whatever it is you need to in order to ensure that she at least can work well with her teammates.”

This certainly explained at least some things about Hinata’s demeanor. Kakashi frowned, ever so subtly. Hinata *could* work well with others when put on the spot. It was more of a matter of her being willing when she felt there was no other choice; and not forcibly pushed into doing what was demanded of her. But Kakashi was one who would push when and where he had to.

So with a smile, Kakashi replied, “Of course, Hyuuga-kun! I won’t teach Hinata-chan any Taijutsu.”

“Very well...” Hiashi paused, then added, “And next time, I expect one of your standing to have more respect, Hatake-san. We aren’t close acquaintances.”

“Of course,” Kakashi said, and pulled out his favorite book with its garish 18+ cover. “I’ll keep that in mind. Have a good night, Hyuuga-san.”

Amused at the expression on the expression on Hiashi’s face, Kakashi went back into the bar. Gai was passed out now and snoring loudly. Kakashi ordered a few shots, downed them easily, and then picked up Gai to drop him off at his apartment. And well, Kakashi knew that Gai wouldn’t mind Kakashi crashing on his couch.

Slightly buzzed, Kakashi carried Gai with his arm draped over his shoulder. There was a lot of thinking Kakashi had to do.

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Kiba regretted complaining about all the D-Class missions they had been doing for the past few days. Painting fences or houses; pulling weeds; shopping for groceries, it was all *so* boring! He wanted a *real* challenge! There were a few that were taking care of animals, and those weren't so bad.

But Kiba wanted at *least* a C-Class if they couldn't get an A or an S. Although Shino had to point out that they weren't ready for any of those just yet. When they went to pick a mission that day, Izumo mentioned something about "Tora-retrieval" and Kakashi immediately jumped on it.

"Mah, you wanted more difficult missions, yeah?" Kakashi held up the D-ranked scroll for this Tora-person.

His team looked so excited, even Shino, who expressed his excitement by arching his eyebrow a certain way. It was cute how all of them wanted this. Kakashi couldn't wait to see their reactions to Tora.

Tora was a cat.

Kiba hated cats. Kiba swore that cat had clawed its way out from the deepest depths of Hell.

Shino had always been indifferent about cats. He vastly preferred insects over Tora any day.

Hinata had always thought that cats were cute. But Tora was the exception.

Tora would bite, scratch, and hiss at anyone who got too close. Tora screeched at an impressive volume; but only seemed to do it when she was right next to someone's ear. Team 8 wondered if the cat was feral. But apparently, Tora belonged to the Fire-Daimyo's wife. It seemed that Tora was a sort of D-Class indoctrination for all fresh Genin.

Upon seeing how the woman smothered the cat with unwanted affection, Shino whispered that he would run away too.

"Mah, we'll probably have to chase Tora down again in a few days. If we're lucky, we'll get first dibs." Kakashi said far too enthusiastically

as he counted out their earnings for the day. He handed the kids their ryo, while only keeping a small percentage for himself. “Tracking and chasing down Tora is really good training for real missions.”

Upon hearing that they’d have to chase Tora down yet again in the near future, Kiba groaned; Shino sighed in resignation; and Hinata winced. They still had plenty of fresh scrapes, bloody scratches, and bruises. The nurse who helped out in the office simply smiled at them knowingly as she applied antiseptic and Band-Aids to their wounds.

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Team 8 had successfully completed a C-Class mission – it was simply a delivery to a small town outside of the village, and they were only gone for a few days.

After checking in at the Missions Office and collecting their pay, Kakashi said to his team, “Let’s go, then. I’ll treat you to ramen for a job well done.”

Kakashi led his wards to a small ramen shop called *Ichiraku’s*, a place that none of them had ever frequented before. Hinata, because it was “too common a place for one of her standing”; Kiba, because he liked barbecue and meat skewers; Shino, because ramen hadn’t ever really been his sort of thing.

“Teuchi-san, Ayame-chan, good afternoon.” Kakashi greeted upon entering.

Teuchi smiled knowingly and Ayame smiled brightly.

“Kakashi-kun! Welcome back! I didn’t think we’d be seeing you today.” Ayame said, before turning her attention to the three kids. “Hello, and welcome!”

“These are my cute little Genin; Shino, Hinata, and Kiba. This is Teuchi-san and Ayame-chan.” Kakashi introduced them as he took a seat at the bar. “We’re celebrating completing our first C-Class mission outside of the village.”

“You want your usual?” Teuchi asked as he put a bottle of sake and a cup down, along with a cup of miso, and Kakashi simply nodded. This indicated that he came here enough that the cook knew his order by heart. “So these are the ones you finally liked, huh?”

“They met my standards.” Kakashi explained with a lazy, one-

shoulder shrug. “It also helps that they show a lot of promise.”

Kakashi pulled his mask down, seemingly to reveal another mask. Kakashi quirked an eyebrow at his team, who were openly staring at him. “Have a seat. Teuchi-san’s and Ayame-chan’s ramen is the best in Konoha. Our lunch today is on me.”

“You flatter us, Kakashi-kun!” Ayame gave Kakashi’s shoulder a friendly tap.

“Nice to meet you kids. Kakashi-san’s told us about you.” Teuchi said as he placed menus down for them to look at. “Let me know when you’re ready. I’ll even throw some *gyoza* on the house for you.” He then glanced down at Akamaru and smiled. “I have some meat I can give to your dog as well.”

Akamaru barked happily in anticipation of food.

“Thanks...” Kiba said quietly as he sent his teammates a baffled look. Kakashi-sensei had told these people about them?

Kiba, Shino, and Hinata all took seats at the bar, feeling severely out of their element at seeing their sensei look so comfortable and casual with the owners. Plus, Kakashi-sensei was eating *through* his second mask – his use of Genjutsu was more than impressive.

Shino silently observed as Ayame laughed at something Kakashi-sensei said. She reached over and touched his arm. Kakashi-sensei was slightly leaning towards Ayame as they spoke. At times, his head inclined towards her, even if it was just a little.

Their body language spoke volumes.

They all placed their orders, and upon taking their first bite, Team 8 found that it really *was* delicious. It was a wonder why they hadn’t thought to try this place before, having walked by it numerous times in the past. Perhaps this could become their Team’s tradition; coming here after a successful mission.

Shino was fairly certain that Kakashi wouldn’t object.

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“We should start stepping up your training,” Kakashi said a few days later as he led the three towards the training grounds. He was slightly hunched, had a hand stuffed in his pocket and he was reading his

favorite book. “Kiba-kun, I think you and Akamaru would benefit from some specialized weight and Taijutsu training...”

“Cool!” Kiba was excited about this, because this would definitely involve learning new Jutsu as well. Akamaru yipped happily.

“I wouldn’t celebrate so soon, Kiba-kun.” Kakashi said ominously, even though he was smiling. “This training will be very intense – we’re going to make your Earth affinity work to your advantage~.”

A shiver went up Kiba’s spine and Akamaru whined. Kakashi-sensei could be scary.

“Shino-kun, I think you should work with some of our resident Suna-Nin and learn about poisons. That’s one of your weaknesses, isn’t it?” Shino nodded, and Kakashi continued, “I’ve heard Suna-Nin regularly ingest poisons, so if we started you with gradual amounts, it will slowly feed into your chakra system and into your allies.”

It made sense...if he built up a tolerance, his allies would as well.

“As for you, Hinata-chan...” Kakashi had a smirk on his face that was visible through his mask. “I think you would greatly benefit from learning the healing arts.”

“Healing?” Hinata questioned.

Kakashi nodded from behind his book. It was a really good part – the guy was about to confess to the girl – but he briefly turned his attention away to look at Hinata who was walking next to him looking as if she were trying to curl into herself.

“Of course! And then you’ll apply your healing arts to your fighting style. And if you happen to pick up whatever Taijutsu moves I’ll be showing Kiba-kun and Shino-kun, I’ll be following your father’s explicit orders.”

Turning a page – this part was so scandalous, good thing he was wearing a mask. “Your Chakra Nature is Water plus, with your *Byakugan* that gives you a certain advantage. I figured you could apply medical knowledge to your fighting style.”

Hinata’s eyes widened and she gaped at Kakashi. Her father was very strict, and had wanted Hinata’s fighting style to *only* be that of the Hyuuga’s. Hiashi had told Kakashi that he didn’t want the man to interfere with Hinata’s at-home training; but he also hadn’t said

anything about her teammates helping out.

Kiba burst out laughing when he realized what Kakashi was doing. Shino hummed approvingly. Hinata smiled, and for once, she didn't duck her face down into her collar. Not as much as she usually did, anyway.

An ever-so-small part of Hinata felt uncertain. Kakashi-sensei seemed to have the faith and expectations for her that her father didn't... Hinata blushed heavily, feeling scandalized at the thought. Hiashi didn't like changes to the Sixty-Four Palms technique, but this was complying *while* making changes.

"Tsunade-hime has high expectations," Kakashi started saying, "so she'll give you a hard time," Kakashi shrugged lopsidedly, "but don't let it get to you – it's her way of seeing what you can handle."

"Alright..." Hinata said. "I'll do my best."

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A little something extra...

Jiraiya frowned heavily from where he stood next to the Third Hokage. The two were standing in a secluded part of the Forest of Death with one of the Toads, Garugama. Jiraiya had been trying to send a message to either Naruto or Zoro, even Gaara – but it couldn't seem to go through.

"It's blocked, *gero*." Garugama said, doing what appeared to be a toad's version of a shrug. "I asked father about it – it seems that the Seals within the barrier don't allow communications to go out. They were put up around the time the Great Sage gifted the Bijū to the villages, *gero*."

"People really wanted us to be locked away, huh..." Jiraiya muttered. "I don't like being so left out – especially if our communications are so one-sided."

"...There's nothing about communications coming in, *gero*."

"It seems like they never expected anyone to be able to send anything in, so they didn't bother with making Seals that blocked messages from coming outside."

"So...we have to hope that Naruto starts learning to properly

Summon..." Hiruzen said thoughtfully. "It makes me wonder though, what they had been so afraid of." He tapped his pipe before taking a few puffs and exhaling. "I understand being worried about a weapon capable of destroying an entire country. But to go to such an extent that they would cut off all contact and communications; to kill any and all outsiders; to pretend that there wasn't an 'outside' beyond the barrier... I feel like I'm missing something important."

There wasn't much Jiraiya or Garugama could add to that bit of observation.

"Has Naruto started learning to Summon?" Jiraiya asked. "He'd be twelve by now, yeah?"

"He has actually, *gero!*" Garugama added with a grin. "Only the smaller Toads so far have been Summoned, *gero.*" Garugama thoughtfully added, "They really like being Summoned by him, *gero.*" Garugama smiled even wider and drooled. "...They're always coming back with strange and delicious food, and have been willing to share with me, *gero!* I can't wait for him to Summon *me*, *gero-gero!*"

Jiraiya arched an eyebrow questioningly. "...Food?"

"Apparently there's a funny pair of cooks that Naruto-chan travels with, and the lady is always giving them new dessert recipes to try out, *gero.* And the guy always has some kind of refreshing drink and food, *gero.*"

"I'd like to learn more about these people Naruto's traveling with," Sarutobi said. "Can you tell us anything else about them?"

"Well, from what I've been told," Garugama tapped his chin, "The Captain is a funny guy who's really stretchy and likes to laugh; there's a Thief who's into some very *strange* hobbies, *gero...*" Garugama whispered, "She likes tying people up and hitting them, you know, *gero.*"

"Huh? *Ohhh...*"

Jiraiya and Sarutobi looked at each other knowingly.

"There are the two cooks I've mentioned; then there's the Tengu storyteller; the reindeer who's a Healer, and the princess, *gero.*"

"'Tengu'? 'Princess'? 'Reindeer'?" Jiraiya repeated.

Sarutobi had an expression that was a mix between amusement and confusion.

“I actually feel slightly more confused.” Sarutobi said tiredly, somehow feeling his age at the moment. Suddenly, he paused and thought about what Garugama had just said. “Wait, did you say ‘Captain’? What sort of Captain is this man?”

“Naruto-chan and the others joined a Pirate crew apparently, *gero*.” Garugama said with a happy smile. “Oh, there’s the end of my time, *gero*. Bye~, *gero!*”

Garugama disappeared in a puff of curly, white smoke, leaving the two men gob smacked. There was stunned silence for several moments before Jiraiya was the first to speak. Several birds squawked as they left their perches, startled at the sudden outburst of,

“He’s a *Pirate?!?*”

Chapter End Notes

Next Time: A whale, and the start of Baroque Works *squee*

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“What have you been telling people about me?!”

-Nami to Naruto, most definitely

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An Author’s Rambles:

About Kakashi:

So, Kakashi has Team 8. Why? Honestly, because after getting to know the teams, I thought that this particular team, trackers, were better suited for someone like Kakashi. Plus, I haven’t really seen any fics (maybe one or two?) with Kakashi having Team 8. I thought it would be interesting to have Kakashi and Team 8 be the subject of Gai’s self-proclaimed rivalry – because who exactly is on Gai’s team in particular??

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I also want to give Team 8 some interesting developments in another interlude chapter. So there very likely could be some slight OOC-ness; but that’ll mostly be from giving their characters some development/it’s my first time writing them... Which means I’ll be going off my own impressions or have been inspired by other amazing authors.

This chapter shows the various contrasts between the members of Team 8, and honestly makes me feel bad for Hinata. The Inuzuka Clan’s closeness; even though the Aburame Clan are quiet and

serious, they're still a close-knit family. Hinata doesn't really get any celebration from her family members, and as of right now, she and Hanabi are strangers.

In this version of the world, I thought it would be interesting if in the Aburame Clan, the Clan Head is a woman – mostly going by all the various kinds of insects having a queen. The Aburame basically manage all the things insects are supposed to do – helping with pollination/making honey and so on.

And hoo-boy... Jiraiya's precious godson is a Pirate... what's a godfather to do?? This is showing where exactly on the timeline things are – well, the adventures of the Straw Hats kinda have to catch up a little in the next few chapters.

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Less polite than "~ san", "~ kun (~ 君)" is used to address men who are younger or the same age as the speaker. A male might address female inferiors by "~ kun," usually in schools or companies. It's also an indication of closeness/friendship. The fact that Kakashi uses "kun" instead of "san/sama" with Hiashi even though he's much older is very disrespectful.

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Warning, scaphism is a very violent method of torture/execution. Scaphism: also known as "the boats" or cyphonism, is an alleged ancient Persian method of execution. The word comes from the Greek σκάφη, skáphe, meaning "anything scooped (or hollowed) out". It entailed trapping the victim between two boats, feeding and covering him with milk and honey, and allowing him to fester and be devoured by vermin.

Basically, some poor soul would be force fed milk and honey to the point of over-stuffing. A milk-honey mixture would be smeared on their face, ears, arms, legs, and genitals; then trapped between boats or hollowed logs with their head, arms and legs sticking out. Insects would be attracted to the sweet smell and would crawl all over, stinging and burrowing into the flesh. The person would even be force fed the milk-honey mixture to keep them alive for as long as possible. If they refused to eat, their eyes would be pricked until they ate. Of course, a person would eventually have to go to the bathroom. Trapped with nowhere to go, the person has no choice but to fester in their own bodily fluids. This would then attract other nasty critters which would eventually eat the person from the inside out.

One victim was noted to have taken seventeen days to die.

That Awkward Moment when you think you're looking at Giant Cacti and it's Actually Tombstones

Chapter Summary

A rather unintended first stop is Reverse Mountain where the crew meets Laboon. This leads them to Whiskey Peak where the townsfolk are a little too happy to see Pirates. Naruto wields Hayabusa, but a Named Blade is a stubborn thing. The crew find themselves wrapped up in a conspiracy involving a Warlord, a Princess, and her country.

Also, Gaara likes ducks.

Chapter Notes

Much of this chapter consisted of me staring at the words, randomly getting distracted by the other pages on the Wiki, videos on YouTube, and watching anime in the time I usually dedicate to writing.

Procrastination is such
A mean wild hair
It made me write a haiku.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The storm tossed Merry to and fro, forcing everyone to work together to make sure that they weren't shipwrecked before even reaching the Grand Line.

Sanji wrestled with the steering while Zoro, Naruto, and Gaara took control of the sails. Since they were able to stick to the ship and not risk being swept overboard, they were the best ones for the job.

Nami was quickly navigating, shouting orders and for the others to keep a look out – which Pudding, Usopp, and Luffy were doing.

“We'll have to pass through a field of rocks when we get near the mountain,” Nami was quick to explain. “So we have to be extremely careful!”

“What if we get capsized before we even get there?” Gaara asked, and a poorly timed massive wave hit the ship, causing the bow to tilt

nearly skywards. This resulted in most of the crew members freaking out. “Our drowned corpses will never be found...”

“Don’t say stuff like that, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto demanded. While Naruto certainly didn’t want to drown, he didn’t have the same concerns as the rest due to being able to stick to surfaces.

“Stop saying we’re all gonna die!” Usopp was imagining their corpses disappearing into the ocean only to be feasted on by giant sharks.

It really wouldn’t be *that* bad, Pudding figured. Luffy was unfortunately a hammer, but that left a few other strapping men to be her rescuer...nearly drowning would be so poetic and dramatic. She sighed dreamily at the thought.

“See that light?” Nami called out as she pointed. There was indeed the flashing light of a lighthouse up ahead. “It points to the entrance of the Grand Line!”

“It’s over there, then?” Luffy asked in a serene way. Ace and Shanks were waiting for him there. He couldn’t wait to see them again!

“Hey, let’s have a quick launching ceremony to mark the importance of our voyage!” Sanji suggested.

“What, *now*?” Usopp questioned. “In this weather?”

“Oh, yes!” Pudding agreed happily. “We’ll just have to be quick.”

“Alright!” Luffy whooped.

“Let’s do it!” Nami agreed. “We still have enough time.”

Sanji only nodded and quickly grabbed a barrel and set it down near the middle of the deck. He then set his foot down on top of it.

“To find All Blue.”

The others followed suite.

“To have a traveling bakery – and create brand new recipes the world has never tasted!”

“To become Pirate King!”

“To become the greatest Swordsman!”

“To draw a map of the world!”

Luckily, Naruto was just tall and flexible enough to place his foot on top of the barrel. “To become the greatest Ninja ever, ‘ttebayou!”

“Uhm, I...to become a brave warrior of the sea!”

Gaara fidgeted with his scarf for a moment. “I just like being free... and seeing new places...is that alright?”

“Then you’ll be an amazing explorer.” Nami said without missing a beat.

Gaara smiled up at Nami for a moment, before placing his own foot on the barrel. “To be an explorer.”

“TO THE GRAND LINE!” they all called out, then raised their feet up to bring them down and break the barrel.

They all whooped, before quickly getting back into position.

“We’re coming up to a bunch of rocks!” Luffy looked a little too happy about that. There was a field of jutting rocks of various sizes ahead of them. It was now all a matter of safely navigating through it.

Already, Nami had a course in mind thanks to that map she had stolen from Buggy.

The ocean in this area was already very dangerous; what with numerous whirlpools and violent rapids. On top of that was the storm, making the journey all the more perilous. Nami was fully aware that the ocean currents around Reverse Mountain were strange; but this was ridiculous!

At one point, Luffy punched one of the rocks when they got too close. At another, a rather violent wave sent them careening towards a very large rock, when a wall of sand immediately intercepted them.

Gaara stood, straining somewhat as he used his sand to push them back on course.

Nami would have more than happily tearfully hugged Gaara and thanked him, but Usopp was doing that for her. Gaara looked annoyed at having Usopp cling to him like he was.

“Usopp, get back up there and watch for the rocks, dammit!” Zoro yelled out. He’d much rather be taking a nap right now!

“Good job, Gaara!” Nami praised with a thumb’s up.

“Thanks...” Gaara quickly took up the rope again.

After what seemed like hours, the storm suddenly stopped. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky above them; and they could clearly see the storm behind them.

“We’re in the Calm Belt.” Nami announced, brushing her wet bangs out of her face.

“There’s something underneath us...” Luffy said. “Like, *a lot of somethings* actually...”

Dark shadows slowly appeared in the water.

/ “Hey, Kit...I’d tell the sand boy to protect the bottom of the ship if I were you...” /

“Gaara, use your sand to protect the bottom of Merry, ‘ttebayou!”

Right as Gaara wrapped his sand around the ship, there was a crashing noise as something very big rose up underneath them – and seconds later, Merry was lifted up out of the ocean. Their ship was precariously balanced on a cow-like Sea King’s head. More Sea Kings rose up out of the sea with gaping maws, hungrily eyeing the Pirates.

“**SEA KINGS!**” Usopp wailed.

Both Naruto and Gaara recalled all those years before when they had seen a Sea King for the first time...and Zoro had claimed it was one of the “smaller” ones... These ones were *huge!* Naruto whooped, and Gaara smiled – looking far too excited about their current predicament.

“That’s where we have to go!” Nami pointed towards a section of the mountain.

“Everyone, hold on!” Naruto moved quickly and positioned himself behind the sails. He went through a series of hand signs before taking a deep breath, his lungs expanding and stretching. “*Kaze Kazeji no Jutsu!*”

A blast of wind hit the sails and sent the ship flying several miles. The Sea Kings were leaping out of the water and snapping at them. Naruto could only exhale so much air; and he collapsed just minutes later,

gasping and wheezing.

“Look out!” Pudding pointed up above them, where a seahorse-like Sea King was trying catch them by simply falling on them.

Luffy was quick to react as he punched the Sea King away.

Fortunately, Naruto had managed to get them just close enough. Luffy then took his turn at sucking in a large amount of air and exhaling it into the sails. They dodged several more attempts from the hungry Sea Kings, before finally...

They reached the base of Reverse Mountain. It was an amazing sight; the top of the mountain actually disappeared into the clouds, and the water was flowing *up*.

To Naruto, it didn't seem fair that Luffy could take in all the air that he did; even though his body was naturally stretchy. It made Naruto realize how much more work he had to put in. The *Wind Blast Jutsu* wasn't actually that difficult to learn; it was executing it. Naruto groaned. Breathing exercises were in his near future.

“I think I'll leave that wind stuff up to you, Naruto...” Luffy said. “Yours looked much cooler.”

That got Naruto to beam up at him. “I'll work hard, Luffy!”

“Everyone, on your feet! There's a point at the top of the mountain where all the water meets, so be prepared!” Nami ordered.

“Alright!” various voices of the crew answered back.

“Of course, Nami-swan!”

The wind and water whipped around them, and Zoro could've sworn that he heard something. But it was difficult to tell with the wind roaring passed. They finally broke the cloud barrier and Nami directed them to sail towards one of the paths that flowed downwards.

The air was clear and the water was fairly calm here, which was a relief. Just then, there was a roaring noise that seemed to shake everything around them.

“What is that...?” Naruto asked as he tentatively uncovered his sensitive ears.

As they neared the bottom of Reverse Mountain, Usopp noticed

something. He adjusted his goggles and looked carefully.

“What the heck...? There’s a mountain blocking the exit!”

Nami was horrified. “The map doesn’t say *anything* about a wall being here! There should just be the Twin Capes and then nothing but open ocean!”

“It doesn’t match any of the rocks here, so maybe someone built it...?” Pudding suggested after taking a look for herself in a way that said she didn’t really believe that.

“Shit! We’re gonna hit it!” Sanji could only do so much from where he was on steering.

“Oh, by the great Sea-Ox...” Usopp muttered his disbelief as he studied the large mass in front of them. “I think that mountain is a *whale!*”

“Then we’ll just shove it out of the way!” Luffy proclaimed as he punched his fist into his palm.

With no time for them to turn at the speed they were going, Gaara quickly stepped up again and created a wall of sand between them and the whale. Luffy then jumped from his special seat and used Gaara’s sand as a springboard. He drew a fist back, to deliver a punch to the whale when he stopped.

There was a feeling that made his skin tingle like pin pricks.

They collided with the whale, and save for those who didn’t have the advantage of chakra (and the practice of using it) were thrown to the deck. Gaara’s sand protected Merry and her passengers from crashing and possibly getting shipwrecked.

There was another clear, deafening roar, causing everyone to cover their ears due to its intensity.

Luffy though, easily stretched his arms out behind him to grab onto the mast and pull himself back on board. He could feel something from the whale. There was a lot of sadness and pain... he recognized that sort of loss. He knew it all too well.

Gaara’s sand returned to his gourd, and much to the continuing and mounting horror of those on board Merry, an eye on the whale opened and peered down at them.

Nami and Usopp hugged each other tearfully.

“That thing’s probably going to eat us and we’ll slowly be dissolved in its digestive juices.” Gaara said frankly.

That caused Usopp to grab Gaara’s scarf and yank the boy towards Nami and himself, tearfully begging, “*Please* don’t say things like that, Gaara!”

“What an anti-climactic way to go...” Pudding whispered.

Just then, the whale opened its mouth for another mournful howl, sucking in gallons water and Merry right along with it.

“I don’t wanna be eaten!” Naruto shouted as the jaws closed around them. “Why did you have to say something like that, Gaara?!”

This wasn’t how any of them anticipated dying. They had barely even gotten started on their journey! Luffy though, didn’t seem all that concerned. He was simply staring skywards amidst all the chaos.

The darkness didn’t last that long, and they were outside again...but the sky didn’t look right.

“How are we alive?” Usopp asked. “Did we die? Is this heaven?”

“Maybe we already got pooped out,” Luffy suggested helpfully.

Zoro sounded annoyed when he said, “We didn’t get pooped out, Luffy.”

Sanji rolled his eyes. “No, look at the clouds – they aren’t moving. We’re still inside the whale....I think?”

“Maybe we did die, and this is just Limbo.” Gaara offered.

Naruto whacked Gaara’s arm in annoyance. “But how can this be *inside* the whale? Where’re all its insides, huh?”

“If we’re actually inside the whale...” Pudding glanced over the edge of Merry to look at the water. Merry-chan was being digested! She was about to point that out, when, “There’s something in the water!”

A large pink squid shot out of the water, a little too close to Merry for everyone’s comfort. The water splashed the crew, causing even more chaos. They were being hit with stomach acid, and everyone was scrabbling to dodge and fight off a giant squid.

Before any of them could do anything, though; there was a loud bang, and a harpoon impaled the squid. There was actually a small island *inside* the whale; and the harpoon had a rope that led to a house on the island.

“W-who is that?” Naruto whispered nervously, as he eyed the silhouette of a person inside the house. Whoever it was began pulling the squid towards them.

“Ahh!” Usopp felt very rightfully unnerved. “We need to shoot it! Blast the island out of the water! Gaara, you need to crush whoever’s in that house!” Usopp insisted as he positioned himself behind Gaara. That seemed like the best strategy for survival. In fact, Nami was hiding behind Gaara too. His sand shield hadn’t failed them yet!

“...Why?”

“Because it could be someone very dangerous!” Usopp couldn’t believe that for once it seemed that Gaara *wasn’t* going to attack what was certainly a very serious threat! He was just being difficult right now, Usopp thought bitterly.

Gaara rolled his eyes, much to the annoyance of Usopp. The Sniper ‘eeped’ when Zoro said, “Oi...someone’s coming out of that house...”

“A...flower?” Sanji said dubiously.

It was a rather intense-looking old man with strange hair and a garish outfit who slowly walked across the island, never taking his eyes off of the Pirates.

“...My mistake...it’s a person...”

“Well...is he an enemy?” Nami asked. “I mean, he shot that giant squid...”

“But then the question would be whether he was just fishing or if he was actually saving us.” Usopp pointed out with clear suspicion.

Luffy cocked his head as he studied the man. He was actually very good at keeping his emotions in check, making him difficult for his mystery sensory power to get a decent read on.

The man continued to say nothing as he went about his business; and not once did he really glance away from the Pirates unless some small distraction actually required him to.

The man walked slowly, slowly... the crew's nerves were making them ready to react to anything... the man then casually sat down in a lawn chair and picked up a newspaper.

"ARE YOU KIDDING ME, DATTEBAYOU?!"

"SAY SOMETHING, YOU ASSHOLE!" Sanji yelled.

The man looked up at them with a bored expression, as if they had the nerve to bother him.

"We can totally fight if that's what you want!" Usopp yelled from the safety of the cabin. "*RORONOA BROTHERS!* Attack!"

"Why are *you* ordering *me* around? You aren't Captain."

"Are we attacking the flower head, 'ttebayou?"

Zoro simply scoffed and pulled Naruto towards him by his collar. Zoro rolled his eyes at Usopp's antics.

Usopp nearly fainted at the idea of the brothers not attacking upon his command. Couldn't they see the danger they were in?!

"The cannon, then! Fire the cannon!"

"...I wouldn't do that if I were you..." the old man finally spoke up. "Someone will die..."

A few tense seconds passed...this man was threatening them?

Pudding drew a knife. A mere cannonball should be the least of this man's worries. "And who would that be, sweetie?"

"Me."

"YOU?!" Sanji ended up yelling at the man.

"I'll scalp that pretty flower from your head!" Pudding looked ready to carry out her threat. That jerk, unnecessarily freaking them out!

"Alright, enough you two." Zoro put a hand on their shoulders and pulled them back. "Don't get pissed off. I'll handle this."

Zoro stepped forward. "Oi, old man. Who are you? Can you tell us how to get out of here?"

Although only a few seconds of silence passed between them, it rapidly went from awkward to tense as the old man slowly turned a page in his paper. "A word of advice, young man... If you want something from someone, it's proper manners to introduce yourself first."

Zoro huffed, but decided to go along with this guy. "Oh, uh, my mistake. I'm Roro—"

"I'm Crocus; the keeper of the Twin Capes Lighthouses. I'm 71 years old, and a Gemini. Blood type is AB..."

"I'm gonna kill that bastard!" Zoro yelled, looking very ready to ghost over and decapitate Crocus.

"Zoro-nii, at least follow your own advice!" Naruto grabbed onto Zoro and wouldn't let go.

Gaara offered his own input. "If you kill him I get to keep his teeth and finger bones."

"Not helping, Gaara, 'ttebayou!"

There was a sense of amusement from the man as he turned another page in his paper. Even with the angered outbursts from his crew, Luffy sensed that the man wasn't worried at all. What was it Grandpa said about people like that? It was something about people being dumb and not being able to survive? But that didn't sound right...

"You want to know how to get out of here?" Crocus asked.

The antics of the crew ceased momentarily. "We can leave?"

"You come into my one-man resort and then yell rude things at me... did you really think I would tell you how to escape Laboon's stomach after all those threats?"

There was an insulting tone to his voice, as if they *should* have known better.

"Wait, we *really were* swallowed by the whale?!" Usopp cried.

Nami's life flashed before her eyes. This was their end... no! "I don't want to be digested!"

There was several minutes of silence before Crocus slowly pointed out, "The exit is over there, by the way,"

“STOP DOING THAT!”

Crocus humphed. “It’s been awhile since I’ve seen another person. Can’t an old man have his fun?”

“Hey, Flower Head-ossan,” Naruto called out, “Why’s a door in a whale’s stomach?”

“Yeah, that’s a good point...” Usopp agreed. “While we’re at it, why’s this weird room even inside the whale?”

“I painted it myself. Took me about two years and a few months.”

“Why the hell are you even *in* here?!” Usopp demanded.

“Can everyone stop yelling at the shitty man so we can leave?” Sanji asked.

“Good idea, Sanji-kun.” Nami quickly agreed. “Since there’s no wind, we’ll just have to row out...”

“I’ve had enough of that loon,” Zoro grumbled.

“Oh, no...” Sanji muttered as he messed with the steering. “Our rudder is broken!”

Nami silently lamented her short life once again as she collapsed to the deck.

“I wonder how long it’ll take for the ship to be digested before the acidic juices reach us...” Gaara said from somewhere to her right.

“Gaara, *stop* saying stuff like that!”

Sanji puffed on his cigarette. “Oi, Gaara, why don’t you just use your sand to row us towards the door?”

But before Gaara could form the sand, the whale cried out as he bashed against the mountain.

“Not this again!” Usopp complained as he made sure he was as far away from any openings as he could possibly be. He was determined to not go overboard, even though that was likely delaying his inevitable end.

Luffy held a hand to his hat as he glanced up. The whale was in terrible, emotional pain. There was also something else – no – two

people above them. The whale slammed into the mountain again. Those two people were coming towards them very fast...and unless they could run very fast or fly (either one would be cool) or they had to be falling (which would be bad). And based on where they would fall into this mystery room...

“Gaara, stick your sand out that way under that hatch!” Luffy ordered. Gaara obeyed without question.

When the whale bashed the mountain again, there was a hatch up above them that slammed open and two people fell onto Gaara’s sand. Gaara quickly pulled them towards the ship.

A man wearing some sort of royal garb and a woman wearing a rather revealing outfit both looked shaken as they pulled themselves to their feet.

Naruto took one look at the oddly-dressed pair. “Are they from the circus?”

Zoro snorted, but quickly covered it up.

“You two!” Crocus was suddenly on his feet holding a rifle. “I thought I warned you what would happen if you showed up here again!”

The strange people both pulled out their pistols. They didn’t really seem to register yet where they were or their situation.

“We need this whale to feed our town, old man!” the man declared as he cocked his gun to aim it at Crocus.

Sensing the genuine anger from Crocus, Luffy acted quickly. He grabbed the man’s arm and yanked it downwards, making him fire into the deck. Seeing that Luffy had acted, sand quickly encased the two. *Now* they seemed to realize the situation they were in.

“Tell me to crush them and I will.”

“Ah! Let us go!” the woman demanded.

“Gaara, you shouldn’t treat a beautiful lady like that!” Sanji said.

Gaara stared at Sanji unblinkingly for a minute or two. “I can throw them into the acid if you don’t like it.”

“Please, no!” the pair quickly protested.

“We can tie ‘em up then Gaara can row us out of here, ‘ttebayou.”

That was the plan they went with, and Pudding quickly hogtied the two back-to-back. “You’re both so lucky that I can tie great knots. It’s too bad no-one here matches my skills.”

“Uh, what?” the woman asked.

Pudding hid her smile as she blushed. “What? I didn’t say anything.”

The door to the outside opened, and Crocus got in his own boat to lead them out. Gaara formed large hands and began rowing.

“So, who are you two?” Nami asked hesitantly. She certainly didn’t trust them as far as she could throw them.

“I’m Mr. 9, and that’s the lovely Miss Wednesday.”

Miss Wednesday elbowed Mr. 9. Although it looked very awkward and uncomfortable in her attempts to do so.

Slowly, Naruto turned; Gaara stopped rowing; and Zoro, who had been reclining with his hand laced behind his head arched an eyebrow.

“Eh, Gaara...? Why’d you stop?” Usopp asked.

“The weird man and the poodle lady.” Gaara answered in a conspiratorial whisper.

“Huh?”

“Sand-brat, keep going.” Zoro said, as he smirked at their guests; causing Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday both looked very nervous at the expression.

Once they were outside of the whale, Usopp wanted to check the bottom of Merry.

“Gaara, you can lift Merry up while I check her,” he then muttered under his breath, “I really didn’t want to use our supplies so early, but it can’t be helped.”

It was more than likely that the whale’s stomach acid had dissolved the lacquer protecting the wood from water damage.

“Hey, you can’t just leave us here like this!” Miss Wednesday

protested as the crew disembarked.

“Just enjoy the pain, sweeties!” Pudding waved.

“Those jerks...” Mr. 9 muttered bitterly.

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Meanwhile, Luffy finally asked Crocus about the whale, “Why’s he so sad?”

“Hmm?” Crocus gave a sort of not-smile. “Fifty years ago, a crew came through here and were forced to leave old Laboon behind when they entered the Grand Line. They promised they’d return. But, they never came back.” He shrugged. “I sailed with Roger for a while you know,” he chuckled at the expression on Luffy’s face. “I tried finding them, but from what I found, after facing the hellish difficulties of the Grand Line, they ran away.”

Laboon wailed, and rammed up against the mountain.

Crocus shook his head. “But Laboon won’t accept that.”

“They really ran away?” Nami asked sadly.

“There’re people who’ll talk big and who have big dreams, but once they are forced to face reality they see it’s better just to give up. Sometimes, they don’t want to admit their failures, so they avoid those they’ve failed.”

That was such a terrible, unhappy story, and Luffy couldn’t stand it.

“Laboon!” Luffy shouted, and he sprung up the side of the mountain. Even though there were those of his *nakama* who tried to stop him, it was fruitless. He certainly couldn’t do much, but he at least had to try. “I’m Monkey D. Luffy! Fight me!”

“D, huh?” Crocus muttered, before he went slack-jawed as Luffy punched Laboon. “What the hell are you doing, you brat?!”

Laboon snarled and slammed against Luffy, who of course wasn’t fazed in the least. Luffy simply held on. Hopefully, Laboon wouldn’t suddenly decide to dive underwater. And if he did, then one of Luffy’s crewmembers would have to save him.

“Make a new promise with me, Laboon!” Luffy said, as he rested a hand on one of Laboon’s many scars once the whale finished his round

of slamming Luffy against the mountain. “I know you miss your old *nakama*, and there’s nothing we can do about that – I know it hurts, so you have to stop. Please.” Luffy smiled a little as Laboon calmed down. When Sabo had died, Luffy had been so hurt and so angry. For a moment, Luffy rested his forehead on Laboon. Then, Luffy smiled wide. “I swear, we’ll return here again someday. So wait for us! Oh! I have an idea!”

Luffy ran back to Merry and got their painting supplies.

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Luffy’s artistic skills were...interesting...to say the least.

“There, that’s a sign of my promise to return so don’t bang your head on the mountain anymore, okay?”

“It’s amazing, Captain!” Gaara praised from where he was with Usopp. The air around Gaara sparkled in his admiration. “It looks *just like* Usopp’s!”

Merry was being held up with Gaara’s sand so Usopp could fix the damaged wood – and by now he was almost done. Seeing the badly painted Straw Hat Jolly Roger, and Gaara genuinely thinking that Luffy’s rendition matched his hurt Usopp’s soul. Even though... Laboon seemed pretty happy with it.

So at least there was one positive.

“Oh! The compass!” Nami was rather distraught when she noticed. The needle was spinning, not focusing on any one point.

“That’s because you need a Log Pose.” Crocus said.

“Yeah, the islands in the Grand Line all have their own unique waves so a Log Pose is a must.” Pudding put in when she handed Crocus a fancy dessert.

“You *knew?!!*” Nami demanded furiously. “And you didn’t say *anything?!!*”

“Well, you’re the Navigator. That’s kind of your job.” Pudding smiled at Nami’s indignant expression. Salt was rubbed into the wound with a smugly added, “I thought you knew.”

Nami’s eye twitched. “Uhg, you!”

“Alright, none of that.” Zoro said as he held Nami back from potentially strangling Pudding by easily grabbing Nami around her waist with an arm.

Nami screeched in surprise because she knew that Zoro hadn’t been that close to her. Why did he have to startle her like that?!

“Get your grubby hands off of Nami-swan!” Sanji demanded as he aimed a kick at Zoro while making sure he wouldn’t hit Nami.

Zoro let go of Nami and drew a sword. “Who are you to tell me what to do, half-assed cook!”

“Here, I can get you one and tell you how to use it.” Crocus offered to Nami, which seemed to calm her down considerably. These people sure were loud ones.

Nami glared at Pudding who was smirking victoriously.

Pudding leaned in and whispered, “I won this round, Na-mi-chan~.”

“We aren’t competing!” Nami shouted, but that only caused Pudding to giggle, irritating her further.

“But you did manage to gain some traction because of Zoro-sweetie grabbing your waist...” Pudding looked disappointed. “So congrats.”

Nami released a very put-upon sigh.

Up on the ship, Mr. 9 groaned as he tried to shift his position.

“I’m really stiff...and I also gotta take a leak.”

“Those people are far too loud...” Miss Wednesday’s stomach took that moment to growl, and she muttered slightly bitterly, “I hope they at least feed us.”

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A few hours later, the Straw Hats set off again; their ship was repaired and they had a Log Pose.

“Here, ya shitty bastard.” Sanji placed a plate of food in front of Mr. 9, but didn’t bother to untie him.

“How am I supposed to eat this?” Mr. 9 asked.

“Get creative.” Sanji replied.

“Here you are, my lady.” Sanji held up some food for Miss Wednesday on a fork. “I prepared it special for you, say *ah~*”

“Just untie them, I don’t wanna hear you making such disgusting noises.” Zoro griped as he untied Mr. 9. “Especially in front of two impressionable brats.”

Sanji glared. Shitty impressionable brats his ass! Had the stupid cactus even *heard* how *they* talk – *especially* Gaara? All the shit that spewed out clearly had been learned from their older brother!

Before he could say anything, Nami’s worried voice spoke up, “Wait, Zoro, what are you doing? Don’t untie them! What if they try something?”

“Oh, they *won’t* do anything,” Zoro said with a smirk as his silver eyes landed on the pair. “Will you, *Baroque Works?*”

“*AHHHHH!*” they both squawked.

“What’re you talking about?” Miss Wednesday asked, looking uneasy. But she kept herself perfectly composed for the most part.

“How do you know that name?!” Mr. 9 demanded at the same time. He desperately looked as if he wanted a weapon. Maybe he could kick them or ram his head against the Chef’s face. That might work if things got desperate enough.

“Oh! The seven man and the father lady, ‘ttebayou!”

“Yep,” Zoro nodded with a smirk. “Some idiot approached me and my brothers several years ago and offered us a spot in your little organization. They rejected my generous offer of being the boss and when we refused to join they tried to kill us.”

“We got Baro-chan from them...” Gaara remembered their first ship fondly.

“You *killed* those two?!” Miss Wednesday asked in mounting horror. She looked as if she was going to be sick. “Oh, merciful gods...”

“Um, hey! Here’s an idea,” Mr. 9 spoke up nervously. He seriously reconsidered fighting back in any way. “How about you take us home, and there’ll be no hard feelings, yeah?”

“It’s not far from here!” Miss Wednesday quickly added. “In fact, from the looks of it, I believe that the Log Pose has already locked onto our island. And it doesn’t take long to set either! Eight hours at most.”

“Look at how things work out, ha, ha, ha!” Mr. 9 said with an all-too-fake laugh. He was sweating buckets at this point.

Luffy shivered as he sat on his special seat. The weird two made his skin tingle in weird ways. Mr. 9 was one thing – he certainly threatened them but it seemed to be a case of “more bark than bite” than anything. Miss Wednesday though, there was something off about her that Luffy couldn’t place. She masked her emotions very well, and played off of Mr. 9, but there was something underneath the surface.

Luffy started to pry a bit, after all, his sensing stuff needed work.

Before he could really start on Miss Wednesday though, her sudden statement of, “We can feed you!” interrupted Luffy’s thought process.

“I thought you said you needed Laboon for food, though...” that was Nami, who was staring at them suspiciously.

“Oh! What kind of food do you have?” that was Pudding. At Usopp’s questioning look, Pudding replied, “I have standards and a taste for inspiring adventure.”

“I don’t know...” Usopp started to reason. “I mean, is it really a good idea to go with these—“

“But there’s food!” Luffy shouted, already drooling.

“What are the ingredients to make the food?” Pudding looked starry-eyed.

Naruto raised his hand. “Do you have ramen, ‘ttebayou?”

Mr. 9 and Miss Wednesday glanced at each other before Mr. 9 asked, “What’s ramen?”

Naruto’s expression was one as if Mr. 9 had committed the most blasphemous sin.

“It’s not worth going to, then!” Naruto determined. “Sanji can just make us ramen here.”

Usopp was annoyed. “How could you use *that* to decide whether or

not we stay?!”

“If they have booze, I actually wouldn’t mind.” Zoro voiced.

“No, no...as the Captain, I’m deciding that we shouldn’t go!” Usopp declared.

“Oi, *I’m* the Captain!” Luffy tackled Usopp to the deck. “I say we go! That’s final, because as the Captain I have the last word. And since Zoro says he wants to drink, he gets to drink!”

Usopp whimpered as he wondered about whatever hellish fate awaited him.

Kyuubi wondered if he should yell at his host for all of this ridiculousness, but doubted that he would be listened to.

Ichibi face-palmed and cursed up a storm about everyone’s logic. \ ***“Tell them they’re fuckin’ idiots! Tell them they deserve to die stupid deaths for this stunt!”*** \

“Come on, everyone!” Releasing Usopp, Luffy’s arms stretched specifically to Naruto and Gaara and he patted them each on their shoulder. “Where’s your sense of adventure? Besides, they’ve gotta have *all kinds* of awesome food!”

Gaara furrowed his brows, because he hadn’t said anything about whether or not he wanted to go.

Ichibi was now yelling about smacking sense into Luffy, about going someplace with two of the people from an organization that tried killing them, and a few insults and numerous curse words were interlaced into his sentences. This was the worst idea any of them could have had.

\ ***“I oughtta shove that stupid grin and that fuckin’ straw hat up your stretchy asshole and make you into a pretzel you dumbass-bastard who couldn’t even--!!”*** \

Gaara tuned Ichibi out. It was probably a good thing the others couldn’t hear him.

Usopp would have shouted himself hoarse if it weren’t for Pudding.

“How about we get something to take back? They’re inviting us to stay, after all. We need to be polite guests.” Pudding pointed out with

a smile. “I mean, they would probably try to take Laboon-chan away again...” Pudding fiddled with her bangs, considering whether or not she should take their memories of the whale – would it even be worth it though? They would probably just send someone else after Laboon.

“We could always just bring the gift of ‘mystery meat’.” Gaara offered his input as he implicitly stared at the pair. He was a bit too amused at Ichibi’s irritation and subsequent pouting. And the pair realizing what he meant immediately freaked and began begging for their lives.

Nami rolled her eyes at the panicked wails. “Gaara, please stop freaking them out. We should at least let *these* two go.” Nami smirked and held up her hand in the classic sign for money, “For let’s say... 9,000,000 belli...each.”

“We can’t afford that!” Miss Wednesday protested.

“Look, there’s our island right there!” Mr. 9 quickly pointed it out. He never thought that those tomb stones would look so inviting. “That’s Whiskey Peak! We can at least give you food and supplies for uh...a bit longer?”

Mr. 9 began to sweat as Zoro stared at him with a hand resting on one of his swords – and those silver eyes were damn creepy in his opinion – and he fumbled through his words, “I mean, uh, if you let us live?”

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Kyuubi could list all the ways this was bad on each of his extremities. The people here were way too happy to have Pirates in their shabby town. Those weird, giant cactuses were large enough that they blocked out natural sunlight even at this time of day. From what he could see as he looked through Naruto’s mind, the town looked wrong. Like a ghost town that a bunch of random people decided to live in on a whim and never really bothered fixing it up.

It was all too strange and suspicious for his tastes – and to top it off, he felt a form of malice from these people.

/ ***“This is really not good, Kit.”*** / Kyuubi voiced, and Naruto simply hummed something under his breath, which seemed to imply an agreement.

“Some of these people are dressed really weird...” Naruto muttered. Some people wore what looked to be eccentric costumes; but considering how unique a person’s style could be, that could just be

their usual style.

“Ma-ma-ma-maaa~! Hem-hem,” a man approached them. “Greetings, I’m Igarappoi, Whiskey Peak’s Mayor. Welcome!”

“Oh, we must have a party for our guests!” a rather tall nun said. “Right this way, please!”

Zoro eyed the Sister for a moment as he followed the procession towards a tavern. The town was fairly large, but didn’t seem big enough to warrant having more than one church - except, where was the church? Maybe it wasn’t as elaborate to have an obvious steeple, or maybe it was located in a place that wasn’t too obvious.

Koshiro’s Shinobi training was basically screeching at Zoro in the back of his mind like nails on a chalkboard. *Always* ask questions when things are *way* too friendly to be normal; even then, ask questions when they are *too* normal. Look underneath the underneath and all that.

Where was the priest anyway? Didn’t churches usually have those? Oh...there he was.

The priest was a white-haired old man wearing long purple and black robes. He easily walked alongside the crew, and he greeted, “Hello, children. I’m Reverend Shooter, a prophet of the holy gods who have blessed our lands. I’m glad you could join us on this beautiful day. I do hope you’ll attend one of our services in the morning.”

“Um, should we go?” Usopp whispered to Luffy and Zoro since they were closest. He hadn’t really been to church since his mother had died – or, if it was some sort of holiday that called for attendance. Would it be impolite to refuse?

Luffy shrugged, since religion wasn’t exactly something he had been brought up with.

“I don’t believe in any gods.” Zoro said bluntly.

That got Usopp to gasp and he nearly admonished Zoro’s tactless response, but didn’t when the Reverend simply laughed in that grandfatherly way.

“Of course, my son.” The Reverend smiled. “No-one can fault you for that. Our holy church is still welcome to all.” His eyes glanced down at Naruto and Gaara; and he smiled softly, “We even have children

your ages with several activities.”

“We’ll stay here, thanks.” Naruto said quickly.

“No.” Gaara said flatly, but Naruto elbowed him. Letting out an obvious and exasperated sigh, Gaara added a reluctant, “No, thanks.”

Reverend Shooter chuckled, “Please, enjoy yourselves, for we have abundance in food and drink. Food tastes better when you eat it with others, don’t you agree? Our musicians are talented, and we have local dances that you can take part in if you so wish to.”

He bowed before making his way towards another group and speaking with them as well.

“He seemed friendly enough,” Usopp said with relief.

“I don’t like him.” Gaara said.

“He smelled like gunpowder, ‘ttebayou...” Naruto whispered.

Usopp gulped. He bent down to Naruto’s level.

“You-you can *smell* something like that?” His nerves weren’t helping him calm down. “Why would a priest smell like gunpowder? Maybe it’s just for self-defense just in case? Right? Eh, right. Right, Luffy? I-I mean, some Pirates would try to take advantage, right? Let these people just *try* to take advantage of the great Usopp!”

Luffy simply smiled, not helping things. “Let’s party, Usopp!”

Well...no-one seemed to be *that* worried...so, maybe he shouldn’t be. Usopp had a tendency to overthink things anyway.

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A few of the others looked happy to be there – the idiot Chef was already wooing several women, and Pudding was surrounded by several men. Usopp’s nervousness was slowly going away as he talked to the overly friendly locals. Even Nami seemed to calm down when she was pulled into a card game.

Zoro’s brothers clung to him – mostly because they didn’t want him wandering off.

Luffy’s hand rested on Zoro’s shoulder. Luffy had a mischievous smirk that stretched a mile wide. “Let’s have fun and celebrate the beginning

of our adventure, eh, Zoro?”

With that, Zoro realized: Luffy *knew* something was up, and he just wanted to take advantage of the situation.

Zoro grinned. “Of course, Captain.”

What neither the First-Mate nor the Captain heard, though, were the indignant howls of stupidity directed towards the crew from the Biju – though, Luffy turned with a smile and honestly confused the two Jinchuuriki with his comment of, “You guys gotta learn to have fun.”

With that, Luffy turned around and raised his arms in the air and shouted, “It’s time to party, guys!”

“Whoo!” the townsfolk cheered and raised their glasses.

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The party was in full swing. There were several musicians playing jovial tunes in various styles; and people were dancing and singing that were rooted in their culture. Even the elderly Reverend Shooter was joining in on the dances, and at times he sat with the Pirates to tell them what certain dances meant.

Nami and Zoro got into a drinking game with the locals – at Nami’s insistence. The locals missed the sly glint in her eye and Zoro’s devious smirk. She knew something the locals didn’t; Zoro’s practically bottomless tolerance. And for Zoro, free alcohol was incentive enough.

The locals who dared take up the challenge were dropping like flies; and those observing were shocked at how much Zoro could drink.

“Zoro, keep drinking so I can get more money!” Nami gleefully shouted above the partiers as she raised her own drink. “I’m betting on you so don’t let me down!”

“This is nothing.” Zoro drained one tankard after the other. He was feeling pleasantly buzzed and still had room for more.

As one man collapsed and another threw up, Nami grinned wickedly as she collected her winnings.

“Is that all you’ve got?!” Zoro shouted as he slammed his empty cup down. One of the few opponents who was still hanging on groaned

pitifully. Nami cackled as she patted Zoro on the back; and Zoro grinned, his silver eyes glinting.

“I can’t take much more...” a poor soul whimpered.

The Sister was still hanging on, but barely.

From where he was sitting on one of the couches with Gaara, Naruto observed Zoro and Nami as they systematically took down the party goers. He sweated a bit nervously as he thought aloud, “Zoro-nii and Nami can get kinda scary when they’re working together, ‘ttebayou...”

“Mm.” Gaara agreed. “I really think that...”

Gaara yawned and simply fell over into a deep slumber. Naruto adjusted his brother slightly so that he was in a more comfortable position, and made a sort of pillow out of Gaara’s scarf. It was about time that Gaara slept this month. He’d be up in a few hours.

Yawning, Naruto settled down next to Gaara. He ignored Kyuubi who was annoyed that Naruto was falling asleep around potential enemies.

“Don’ worry ‘bout it, t’bayou.”

Kyuubi huffed in exasperation. Stupid kit.

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Meanwhile, over with the others:

“Luffy, have a drink!” Zoro said with a grin as he held up another tankard.

“...I’m underage...” Luffy muttered. “By a year.”

Zoro arched an eyebrow. “You’re a *Pirate* and you care about stupid rules like that? I was fourteen.”

Truthfully, thirteen *almost* fourteen – he had easily ghosted into Koshiro’s locked shed for a bottle of his alcohol. Koshiro had found him passed out in a tree several miles away that Zoro didn’t remember climbing and was none-too-happy.

He’d had kitchen duty (no cooking, luckily) and had to clean the floors of the entire dojo every day for six months, but it was worth it.

“Well...” Luffy *had* eaten a lot of meat, and hadn’t Makino said stuff to

her patrons about eating food before drinking? Shanks and his crew had always eaten lots of food when they had drinks and partied. “Just one couldn’t hurt.”

It wasn’t very long until Luffy raised what would be his third tankard, and he whooped as he threw an arm around Zoro. He practically shouted in the older teen’s ear, “You’re the best, Zoro!”

“Yeah, yeah.” Zoro tried pushing Luffy’s face away, but that only resulted in Luffy’s neck stretching.

“You are, you really are...you don’t believe me...” Luffy blubbered as he pulled his First Mate into an awkward hug that wrapped around him multiple times; much to Zoro’s annoyance. “You’re such a cool older brother, but Ace is better, he...he’s got a lot of...f...FOOD!”

Luffy released Zoro and ambushed Sanji for the food he was serving.

“Oi! This food is for the ladies!” Sanji objected as he tried to shove a drunk Luffy away.

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Many hours later...

Nami woke up with a gleam in her eye. The trick to not pass out completely when alcohol was involved was to let it get watered down with ice and get new drinks often – having a high tolerance certainly helped. Pretending to pass out was the cherry on top.

She glanced around, and all of her crewmembers were asleep.

She spotted Gaara, and murmured, “Ah, he’s asleep...” the Thief smiled for a moment, as she had never actually seen Gaara asleep. “His sleeping face is so cute...”

Getting back on track, Nami grinned. It was time to see what sort of treasure these people had. They didn’t even stir as she searched them. When Nami was nearly done checking the pockets of the people in the room, she quickly and quietly made her way outside to see what sort of treasures these people had.

These people had quality food and alcohol; and that sort of thing was expensive. They had to have some sort of treasury. Nami’s eyes gleamed when she imagined the piles of money that was stored somewhere. She had taken several keys out of the pockets of the

people inside, so now she had to find their locks.

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Luffy yawned and stretched as he sat up. Why had he woken up? Luffy laid back down so he could go back to sleep. He had just settled into a comfortable position when he was hit with an urge.

“Gotta pee...” Luffy mumbled in annoyance at the unwelcome bodily function. Pulling himself to his feet, Luffy wandered off to find a restroom.

Minutes later, Zoro was up and had already drawn Wado. He absentmindedly ghosted into a standing position. Really...these people weren't as convincing as they would've liked.

It was admittedly a bit awkward with them staring at him as they tried to wield their knives in a surprise sneak attack.

“Why are you already awake?!” Igarappoi demanded of him. “After drinking so much, too...!”

“Oh? That was just a casual night for me.”

“C-c-casual!”

“If we all work together, no way he can beat us!”

“Charge!”

With a loud shout, the townsfolk raised their weapons and rushed forward.

“Stop making so much noise you guys.” Usopp muttered before he went back to sleep in a curled up position.

Zoro intercepted several attacks before shoving the townsfolk away.

Meanwhile, in Naruto's mindscape, Kyuubi began thrashing about in his cage. / **“Wake up, dammit! Wake up you stupid Kit and fight! This isn't the time to be asleep! WAKE UP, DAMMIT!!!”** /

Naruto shot up, “AAAHHHH!!!”

“GAAHHHH!!!” Zoro ghosted back several feet in surprise, inadvertently dodging an attack, and causing a few people to strike each other. “What the *hell*, brat?!”

“Uhh...Someone was yelling at me.” Naruto said a bit shakily.

He jerked when a woman charged at him – and Naruto quickly flipped out of the way and landed on the ceiling on all fours – and stayed there for a moment. His tired brain was trying to catch up.

“They’re attacking us, ‘ttebayou?”

/ ***“Why are you even questioning this?! How is this a surprise?!”*** /

“How are you sticking to the--!” the woman was cut off when Naruto suddenly sprung off of the ceiling and punched her face. Her nose was bloody and was likely broken, and some of her front teeth were visibly gone – he felt somewhat guilty about that.

Igarappoi cursed upon realizing that these people weren’t as easy to take out as others in the past. “Get back and regroup!”

The townsfolk who could still move quickly retreated outside to come up with a plan of some sort.

Glancing around, Zoro realized that Pudding wasn’t there – and neither was Nami. What were they doing? Even Luffy was gone.

Zoro scoffed. They better not have gotten themselves lost.

“Oi, brat. Feel like testing out your new weapon?”

“Yeah, okay.” Naruto took out Hayabusa along with the other kusarigama, and could feel Hayabusa already thrumming with anticipation in his palm. “Why’re they attacking us, though? We can’t be worth it.”

Standing outside and preparing for the upcoming fights, Zoro glanced out at the gathering townsfolk. He tied his bandana around his head. “Those two from earlier probably told everyone that we knew about their organization and that we killed the messenger.”

Zoro unsheathed Sandai Kitetsu and studied it. He could already feel the Blade calling out for blood, so he’d have to be careful. He added thoughtfully, “Our valuables would be worth taking though.”

“Do we have to kill them, ‘ttebayou?”

“Only if you can’t avoid it.”

Naruto smirked, “Right!”

Their casual attitude should have been a cause for concern, but really, what could two people do to a town of a few thousand? The brothers split up, both itching for a fight.

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Someone charged at Naruto, wielding a saber. They swung downwards, and Naruto quickly dodged to the side. He swung Hayabusa's blade upwards and... Naruto gaped when the man's arm was sliced off completely and the poor guy dropped to the ground screaming, his remaining hand pressed against his gushing wound.

"Ah! *Crap!* Hayabusa, that's *so not* what I wanted you to do, 'ttebayou!"

He had just intended a surface-level wound! Not something that permanent! Naruto could have sworn that Hayabusa was laughing – testing him out, or something. It would probably take a lot of work to contain his weapon. He had been so confident back in Logue Town and now here he was!

A furious companion charged at Naruto with a large knife. Raising his other kusarigama to block, Naruto quickly realized that the strike would still hit him – unless – he used Hayabusa with his other hand. He awkwardly swung Hayabusa to hopefully only slightly injure, and paled somewhat as several people lost their feet.

Well...he had just wanted to *not* do that much damage!

Holding onto both kusarigama tightly, Naruto ran off, twisting and dodging strikes. This left the weighted and spiked ends of the kusarigama to swing around freely behind him.

More extremities and blood went flying...followed by agonized screams and enraged shouting.

This forced the people to back off, and Naruto quickly jumped to the rooftops and ran along the buildings sideways as he was trying to think. Ehhh...how was he going to wield two kusarigama when it was a two-handed weapon? He should have thought this through! It had been an impulsive thought that had sounded pretty cool at the time! He had just wanted to be as cool looking as Zoro!

Hayabusa's bloodlust was coming out, and Naruto could feel the irritation radiating off of the kusarigama when he wouldn't go all-out with his attacks and kept pulling the Blade back.

“I wish I had asked the old man how human-Hayabusa used kusarigama-Hayabusa, ‘ttebayou...” Naruto complained to himself. “How did he wield you, huh?” he quickly dodged a rain of bullets. “Whoa!”

Naruto twisted around, and the weighted-spiked kusarigama ends slammed into one of his attackers. The woman screamed as her ribs were broken and her flesh was torn. But it was clear by Naruto’s reaction that that wasn’t the intended result.

/ ***“What the hell are you doing?!”*** / Kyuubi demanded, irritably slamming his claws around in his cage.

“I’m *trying* to figure out how to do this, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto took off when several more people with guns appeared.

/ ***“And you thought now was the perfect time to practice?! Dammit, Kit! Just pick one weapon for now and stick with it! Don’t be pulling this crap when you’re fighting for your life! Practice when your life doesn’t depend on it!”*** /

Naruto jumped down a random alleyway, and jerked in surprise because he wasn’t the only one there. In fact, he had practically landed on top of the person.

“KYAAAAHHHH!!”

“EHHHH?!! Nami?!”

“Keep quiet, Naruto!” Nami hissed as she grabbed his collar and covered her mouth with a finger.

“Huh...I’m surprised you didn’t just tie any of them up before this started, ‘ttebay-ow!”

“Stop saying that!” Nami huffed irritably. Seriously, this kid! “Anyway, keep these people distracted, will you?”

“Why me? You can fight too.”

“Because,” Nami huffed impatiently, “I’m trying to steal from all these people!”

She held up a small bag of things she’d already gathered and shook it purposefully.

“Fine.” Naruto returned a huff of his own. Tucking his old kusarigama

away, he'd have to learn later when Kyuubi wasn't yelling in his head and Hayabusa was being more cooperative. He was determined for Hayabusa to listen to him, dammit! Naruto quickly made his way back out onto the streets. "Oi, dumbasses!"

Naruto took a running start and leapt up a building. He built up momentum as he bounded from building to building. Naruto leapt up above the crowd, and went into a spinning motion. It was difficult as he tried to control his wind chakra, not allowing all of it to flow out haphazardly as he went.

"Akuma-hō no Kaze no Setsudan Gijutsu!"

It was clear that he was holding back, and Hayabusa continued trying push forward and slaughter everyone. There was amusement from the Blade and the wind blades cut through the surrounding area. People who were caught in the attack either didn't lose their limbs; but they were cut pretty badly. They were lucky, considering the damage to the surrounding buildings.

"Stop! Stop this, please!" Reverend Shooter slowly made his way out onto the street with his hands raised. "Let us stop this mindless violence."

Naruto scowled as he landed, and raised his weapon. Was this guy serious?! Lying on the ground around him, several people were groaning in pain. Naruto probably would have felt guilty if it weren't for one obvious fact:

"Oi...you guys attacked *us* first!"

"Hm...I tried." The Reverend suddenly pulled out a large gun from his robes and began firing, and Naruto quickly ducked out of the way with a surprised yell.

Naruto practically ran on all fours towards the Reverend, pumping chakra through his limbs to go faster, while zigzagging gunshots. Leaping up and going into a spinning motion then striking downwards, Naruto called out, "Kōka suzume sutoraiiku-jutsu!"

The image of several small birds burst out of Naruto's attack, spreading their wings as they cut through the hail of bullets and struck Reverend Shooter across his torso. The Reverend groaned as he collapsed to his knees, and fell forward.

Naruto quickly checked to see that the Reverend was still alive by

poking the man with his toe – he *was* – and Naruto whooped. He had struck someone with a controlled strike!

“You see that, Hayabusa?!” Naruto couldn’t resist leaping for joy. “I’m pretty awesome, aren’t I? The best, ‘ttebayou!”

An explosion cut off Naruto’s premature celebration.

“What...was that?” Naruto wondered aloud. Gripping Hayabusa, Naruto quickly made his way towards where he had heard the explosion come from.

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After splitting off from Naruto, Zoro was fighting his way through several of the townsfolk. He didn’t use any serious attacks, testing out his new swords first. Sandai Kitetsu was stubborn; it insisted on cutting too deep and maiming permanently when he only wanted minor wounds that would make the people back down. He could hear the Blade asking – *demanding, screaming* for more blood.

Perching on the roof of some building, Zoro studied the Blade. “You’re quite the problem child, aren’t you? Not listening to your master...”

Hearing something behind him, Zoro turned his head to see a kid who was probably around his brothers’ age. The kid looked nervous as he held up a large knife.

“AHHH!” the kid charged forward, and Zoro easily blocked the pathetic strike with a simple swing of his sword.

The boy gasped when the knife was knocked out of his hand, and he had tears in his eyes as he stared up at Zoro with a frightened look. For a brief second, Zoro thought of Koshiro – and of course, he thought of Naruto and Gaara being in such a position – and he hesitated.

But there was a glint in that kid’s eye that Zoro had seen plenty of times in people who weren’t so innocent; before their true nature showed itself. The boy suddenly charged again, pulling a smaller knife out from somewhere on his person. The boy was likely counting on his target hesitating because he was a kid. Zoro quickly ghosted out of the way by mere inches, and brought the back of his sword down, striking the kid’s hands. The boy cried out and dropped the knife.

From the way he held his hand, it was likely broken.

“Heya, kid.” Zoro pointed Yubashiri at the boy’s face. “Nice try, but this isn’t a life you should be living this young.”

The kid glared, and Zoro caught movement out of the corner of his eye – and a fist connected with his face. Zoro quickly righted himself to face this new attacker.

“Roronoa Zoro!” the Sister charged forward, with a fist drawn back. She gaped when her punch met empty air, and Zoro was standing on the ground below. “W-what?”

She hadn’t even seen him jump down! How had he done it? There was only one possibility.

“You’re one of those Fruit users, aren’t you?!” Miss Monday tore off her Sister outfit to reveal a wrestler’s uniform – and it was impressive that her disguise could hide her bulk. “Not a problem!”

Zoro scoffed. “I could never eat a Devil Fruit.”

Miss Monday of course was somewhat taken aback. How could an ability like that *not* be a Devil Fruit? Had he gone through some sort of ridiculous training?

She dove off of the roof with the intent of bringing her fists down on Zoro – and the ground cracked and spider-webbed out as she landed. Scoffing, Miss Monday stood up straight, trying to see where Zoro could have gone. She heard something shift behind her; and as Miss Monday turned, she saw something out of the corner of her eye.

But when she looked, it was gone.

Then, as she turned back, Miss Monday gasped in surprise when Zoro was in front of her. He had come in low, and came up so suddenly, she didn’t have time to defend herself. His hand clamped around her forehead, and it felt as if the world slid by.

Miss Monday found herself slammed into the ground, and she felt groggy, as if she’d had too much to drink. Zoro’s hand was still clamped around her face. Then, he began to squeeze.

Miss Monday tried to fight back, but whatever that technique had been, weakened her and her body just wasn’t listening to her brain. Miss Monday passed out.

Zoro stood up, and left Miss Monday on the ground. He gave his hand

a few shakes, because Miss Monday had been gripping his arm tightly in her attempts to get him to release her. Now...who was left?

“Miss Monday!” Mr. 9 shouted, and Zoro quickly dodged his attack, by stepping backwards.

“*Ahem. Ma-ma-mah~!* Don’t think you’ll get away with this!” He tugged on some wires, and guns pointed out of the curls in his hair. Bullets rained down, and Zoro drew his blades. He went into a quick spinning attack, and easily cut through the hail of bullets. Then, it was a short burst – he ghosted forward, suddenly appearing in Igarappoi’s face – taking him by surprise. Zoro’s blade slashed upwards, across the man’s chest. It wasn’t a serious enough wound, though.

Igarappoi gave some other wire a quick pull, and a gun slot opened on his belt. Zoro’s eyes widened, and he barely dodged. The bullet had grazed his shoulder enough that he was slightly bleeding. Zoro quickly went for another attack, before the man could pull another gun from somewhere.

“Mr. 11!” Miss Wednesday’s voice sounded extremely concerned. Turning to Mr. 9, “He’s a Devil Fruit user, so be careful!”

“I’ve got it, no worries.” Mr. 9 replied, pulling out a spool of thick wire from his coat.

Igarappoi quickly backed away when he could, and he could tell that Zoro was intent on giving him another slash – likely an even worse injury simply because he had nearly blown the kid’s face off.

“Bushido-san!” Miss Wednesday called out, and she pulled open her coat to show her bodice. Because he didn’t want to unintentionally get caught in her spell; but mostly out of respect, Igarappoi turned away.

Zoro arched an eyebrow.

Miss Wednesday began to sway and dance, “*Miwaku no Memai Dansu!*”

Zoro felt his concentration slip very briefly, and his thoughts became muddled. Something wrapped around his arm, and he heard Mr. 9 yelling, “I’ve got him!”

“Karoo!” Miss Wednesday shouted, “Get him!”

Was that a giant duck? Zoro wondered if the hypnosis-dance was

messing with his head.

“Quack!” Karoo charged...in the wrong direction.

While the others were distracted with yelling at the duck for going in the wrong direction, Zoro concentrated, and ghosted out of Mr. 9’s hold.

Mr. 9 stared, his eyes going in between Zoro and the wire that had been wrapped around his arm. “That was Sea Stone-laced wire! How could you escape that?!”

“I’m not a Devil Fruit user,” Zoro said with a smirk, and he charged forward and punched Mr. 9.

The other man collapsed to the ground, and glared at Zoro. He wiped away a trickle of blood. Seriously, these people were far more trouble than they were worth!

Just then, Luffy came around the corner. He looked slightly dazed. Although he became more alert when he spotted his First-Mate.

“Zoro! Zoro!” Luffy didn’t pay attention to anyone else as he made his way towards Zoro. “I was walking around, looking the bathroom right? When I found an awesome-huh?”

Miss Wednesday, riding atop Karoo, snagged Luffy and held a knife to his throat.

“Now, Bushido-san, you will surrender...” she trailed off when Luffy’s arm stretched up and grabbed her coat collar – and she was yanked from her seat and thrown to the ground.

“Oi, I was talking to Zoro,” Luffy complained, almost whined.

It was when Igarappoi was so concerned about Miss Wednesday, that Zoro charged at him and he used the back of Wado to strike the man’s stomach. With a gasping wheeze, Igarappoi collapsed in the dirt.

“As I was saying, before I was interrupted,” Luffy sent a pointed look at Miss Wednesday here, “I was exploring and I ended up on the giant cactuses, and guess what, Zoro! They’re tombstones, not pokey things!”

“What?” Zoro replied, doing a double-take.

“Yeah! Tons and *tons* of tombstones. My brothers and I used to play in

the graveyard back home...”

“Found you,” a man’s voice interrupted Luffy.

“Hello, Miss Wednesday!” a woman’s voice called.

“Mr. 5? Miss Valentine’s Day?” Miss Wednesday quickly pulled herself to her feet. There was nervousness in her voice as she indicated Luffy and Zoro. “I can fight them, I’m taking care of it right now!”

Miss Valentine’s Day made a face as she put a finger to her chin. “... Orrrr, should I say... Nefertari Vivi?”

Miss Wednesday balked. “What...what are you talking about?”

“We got a report about a spy being among us.” Mr. 5 said in a threatening tone. “And here you are.”

“You know who Mr. 0 is, don’t you?” Miss Valentine’s Day asked, with a wicked grin. “Don’t worry...we’ll kill you relatively quickly.”

“RUN VIVI!” Igarappoi was on his feet, albeit shakily.

Vivi quickly clamored back onto Karoo and took off.

“Get after her!” Mr. 5 shouted, and he glared at Luffy and Zoro, who were watching the events unfold in various states of confusion. “We’ll take care of those two later!”

Miss Valentine’s Day opened her umbrella with dramatic flourish, and she began to float. Mr. 5 made something explode, and the woman shot up into the air. Bullets whizzed past her, but she didn’t seem to care. Igarappoi’s aim was off, anyway.

“Enough.” Mr. 5 flicked something at Igarappoi, and he was sent flying back from an explosion.

Mr. 5 started running in the direction that Vivi had gone.

“Sorry, but I can’t let you!” Mr. 9 grabbed Mr. 5.

“What are you doing?!” Mr. 5 demanded. “That woman is a traitor!”

“I don’t care!” Mr. 9 shot back. He knew he was outmatched, but to hell with it. “We’ve been partners for several years! She’s had my back more than once! I always pay my debts!”

Mr. 5 grabbed Mr. 9's head, and the latter's eyes went wide – and there was an explosion that dropped Mr. 9 to the ground. He wasn't moving, and he was seriously injured.

"Foolish." Mr. 5 muttered, before he took off as well.

"What." Luffy shook his head. His brain felt heavy, like it wanted to crawl out of his mouth. That was horrifying imagery! "What just happened?"

"She was a spy...?" Zoro questioned. He felt like he had walked into the middle of a conversation.

"You guys!" Nami ran up to them just then, and she carried a small bag. "What was all that?"

"I'm so confused..." Luffy said slowly. "My mouth feels funny."

"You there, Pirates!" Igarappoi called out. He hoisted himself to his feet using a nearby wall. "Please...please, save Princess Vivi!" He had tears rolling down his face. "I'll tell you everything, but please, save the Princess!"

Luffy's muddled mind tried to sort through Igarappoi's emotions, but he couldn't focus on them. Do emotions sway?

"Uhhh...Zoro?" Luffy looked at Zoro, "Go save her?"

"Dammit. Fine..." Zoro sighed.

Zoro quickly ran off in the opposite direction everyone had gone, and Nami was about to correct him when Zoro turned down a random alley – only to appear on the path ahead, coming out of a completely different alley. He was also finally going in the right direction.

"That is...way too weird." Nami said to herself. Why was she even surprised anyway?

"Cool trick..." Luffy murmured, looking fascinated. "Zoro's pretty awesome, right?"

Nami got back on track. "Anyway, what's going on?"

Igarappoi, who turned out to actually be called Igaram; quickly explained who Vivi was, and begged the Pirates to help save a country.

He was floored when Nami demanded 1,000,000,000 bellies for compensation.

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Meanwhile...

Vivi glanced behind her nervously, and she could see Miss Valentine's Day catching up. She fought the tears going down her face. Both Mr. 9 and Miss Monday had stood up for her, *knowing* they didn't stand a chance, and...they had paid the price. Were they okay? Were they even alive? Mr. 5 had been ruthless.

"Go faster, Karoo!" Vivi begged, and the duck quacked in response. If they could get to the boats... Miss Valentine's Day wouldn't sink one if she couldn't swim, right? Her attacks likely weren't suited for nautical warfare. But then Mr. 5 could just fire a bomb...

There was a loud crash behind them, and the impact unfortunately sent them flying. Dazed, Vivi pushed herself up.

"Karoo! Karoo are you okay?"

"...Quack..." Karoo squawked. "Quack!"

Miss Valentine's Day sauntered out of the dust, twirling her umbrella. She maintained a careful distance. "Did you really think you could escape us, Princess?"

"It's time to end this nonsense." Mr. 5 said coldly, and he picked a booger to flick it – and Vivi wondered if this was how she was going to die. Suddenly, the world around her shifted. Zoro was in front of her seemingly as if he had stepped out of thin air.

He glared darkly at his sword, clearly incensed. "I cut a *booger*?"

"Bushido-san?" Vivi questioned disbelievingly.

"My Captain ordered me to." Zoro replied with a very put-upon tone.

Vivi was extremely confused; grateful, but still. She'd just been trying to kill him, too.

"Oh. It's you." Mr. 5 drawled.

"His Captain? Guess they're causing trouble for us, after all." Miss Valentine's Day smiled. "I'll crush you *slowly*."

Zoro rolled his eyes and drew his other swords. Suddenly, Mr. 5 was pulled into the ground. He and his partner's shocked faces matched that of Vivi and Karoo. Miss Valentine's Day quickly moved, widening the distance between herself and whatever enemies were there. She floated above them, eyes searching.

Naruto pulled himself out of the ground just then. He delivered a swift kick to Mr. 5's head, knocking him out. Naruto brushed off his hands, and grinned.

"Zoro-nii! Guess what, I-" he started running towards Zoro when Zoro suddenly moved – there was a loud crash, and Naruto found himself next to Vivi. Both of them coughed because of the dust.

Miss Valentine's Day stood up, but before she could float off again, a hand gripped her shoulder. Slowly, Miss Valentine's Day turned, and looked into a silvery-eyed gaze that bore into her soul. A suffocating feeling wrapped around her throat.

"That was my little brother you just tried to crush."

Miss Valentine's Day let out a strained scream, never having felt such a terrifying sensation before.

Dialing back his Killing Intent, Zoro then hit Miss Valentine's Day on the head, and knocked her out. He then simply released her and let her fall to the ground.

"Stupid brat, don't drop your guard like that when there's enemies! *Never* drop your guard even when it seems safe!" Zoro admonished, and Naruto guiltily ducked his head.

"I'm sorry...I didn't see her..." He had gotten too excited, and simply forgot his basics.

Zoro ruffled Naruto's hair. "Good job, though."

Naruto grinned.

"How's the new blade?"

"Frustrating..." Naruto groaned. "He's so stubborn!"

Naruto also pouted a bit, not looking forward to the inevitable harsh training in his future. Naruto leaned to look at Vivi and –

"Is that a giant duck?"

"This...this is Karoo..." Vivi said a little awkwardly.

"You alright?" Zoro asked as he approached the princess and her duck.

"...I feel so confused...more than anything." Vivi muttered.

Karoo gave a squawk in agreement.

"Let's move somewhere else, Bushido-san, Naruto-san..." Vivi suggested. She really didn't want to be there when the two agents woke up.

They navigated their way through the side streets, keeping an eye out.

Vivi was even *more* confused by Zoro, who was insisting that they needed to go a certain way to find the others.

"No, no, Zoro-nii!" Naruto argued back. "We just came from *that* way, 'ttebayou!"

"But that's way I came!"

"We'll get lost following your directions!"

"Damn brat, I don't get lost!"

Karoo arched a feathery eyebrow, and shared an equally perplexed look with Vivi.

"There you are!" Luffy's voice called. "See, Nami? I told you I could find 'em."

Nami rolled her eyes. "No, this was entirely by chance. You basically turned down what looked to be the most interesting alleys!"

Luffy scratched his head and chuckled. Okay, so his Mystery Power was still all funky. But he had found them!

"Alright, Princess!" Nami stood with her hand on her hip. "Igaram-san promised that he'd pay me 1,000,000,000 belli to have us escort you back to Alabasta." Nami ignored the gapes she got from the likes of the brothers, Vivi, and the duck. "We didn't really have time to talk, so what exactly is going on?"

Since Igaram had given them his name, and had asked them for help, then surely they could be trusted. Vivi wrung her hands. But seriously!

That much money? Desperate times and all that.

So, Vivi told them a tale of war brewing in her country, of someone pulling strings and making her father look as if he was exploiting his people, of infiltrating Baroque Works and rising through the ranks – and most important of all – she knew the identity of Mr. 0.

“Oh, that guy...” Naruto rolled his eyes. “If I was the leader of a big organization, I’d have a much cooler nickname.”

“This isn’t about cool nicknames!” Vivi said. “This man is very dangerous!”

“Well, who is he then?” Nami asked.

“I can’t tell you! It’s too dangerous!”

“How are we supposed to help you if you don’t let us know who we’re fighting?” Zoro asked with a tone of annoyance.

“Probably some loser, with a name like Mr. 0, ‘ttebayou.”

“He’s *not* a loser!” Vivi cried. “It’s Sir Crocodile! He’s a powerful Warlord!” Vivi’s hands suddenly shot up and covered her mouth. “Oh, no! I said it!”

There was a loud squawk above them, and an otter and a buzzard sat on the building above.

“The Unluckies!” Vivi realized in horror.

Nami scoffed, “I’m out, I’m out! No way am I going up against a Warlord!”

When Nami saw that her face was now on a hit-list for this organization, she turned back to the others. With a smiling face, she marched up to Vivi and began to throttle her.

“Damn you, I can’t leave now!”

“Oh, my...Nami-chan, sweeties, what’s going on?”

“Pudding!” Nami turned to see Pudding, who was hauling a large cartful of goods.

Pudding’s hair was messy; one of her pigtails was partially undone, the sleeve of her dress was torn, and portions of the pastel purple

dress looked gray. There were several more rips in her dress and leggings that looked as if she had gotten slashed by something.

“Apparently we’re going up against a Warlord called Crocodile!” Luffy announced excitedly.

“Oh? I know Crocodile.” Pudding said with a smile on her face. “He came to Mama’s house when I was little. He wasn’t a Warlord, then.”

There was another squawk, and now, Pudding’s face had been added to the others.

“Oh, no...” Vivi said in horror. “The more people of your crew that they know the more danger you’ll be in!”

“Oh, my! How cute!” Pudding said. “But that’s not the best picture of me, I mean, I don’t look very cute *at all*, right now.”

Pudding’s smile darkened, and she pushed her bangs back. “Hey... anything to do with me, Luffy, Nami, Zoro, and Naruto...you’ll give me what you know, won’t you?”

Strings flowed from the heads of the two Unluckies, and they fainted after a few seconds. Pudding stumbled a bit, but easily corrected herself. “Oh...that actually worked? I’m relieved.”

“You...how...what?” Vivi stammered.

Nami was yelling at Pudding now. “You *weren’t* sure that ability of yours would actually work?!”

Pudding laughed and waved Nami off. “Look here, Nami-chan. I got something for you.”

Pudding held up a small bag that had a certain clinking sound to it.

“I wasn’t sure what was worth anything, so I just took whatever sparkled the prettiest.”

Nami snatched the bag away and inspected its contents. Gold, and various gemstones were housed inside.

“Aw, you’re my favorite person, Pudding!” Nami hugged her.

“What happened to you?” Naruto asked, really taking in Pudding’s appearance.

“There was a man who flirted with me at the party earlier. He wanted to share recipes and *techniques*.” Pudding blushed a little. “After that man took me to his house, and he was showing me his wine collection...” Pudding sighed happily. “It turned out he had some really rare wines, cheeses, spices, and delicious-sounding recipes...” she was practically drooling at the mere thought of food. “He wouldn’t tell me where he got them unless we...” Pudding glanced at Naruto. “We shared *techniques*, the stingy fudge cake. So I took his memories of where he kept them.” Pudding shrugged, “Along with a few others who wouldn’t tell me what I wanted to know.”

“So...you just wanted food.” Nami said flatly. Why wasn’t she surprised?

Pudding certainly didn’t deny it. “Well, yes.”

“Okay...?” Naruto was feeling a bit lost.

“That all sounds so good...” Luffy said to himself.

“While I was busy with that,” Pudding smiled, “a lot of people entered and...” she sighed melodramatically, “...they attacked me.”

“Are you alright?” Vivi asked in honest concern.

Pudding pouted, “One of them hit me with a large staff. Another had a whip. It was mildly disappointing.”

This resulted in several blank and confused stares. Although Zoro rolled his eyes and Nami slapped her forehead.

“Oh, Zoro-sweetie, would you mind hauling this cart for me?”

“It’s your shit. Haul it yourself.”

Pudding then reached into the cart and pulled out two large bottles. “This burgundy is from the easternmost island in East Blue; which is a volcanic region, and the alcohol from there is incredible and is that region’s most valuable export. You can have both of these.”

Zoro grinned at Pudding as he took the cart from her. “Why didn’t you say so? Of course I wouldn’t mind.”

“Aw, thank you, sweetie!” Pudding blew a kiss.

Now Naruto rolled his eyes. Zoro’s priorities were far too clear.

As was her tendency, Nami was one to get back on track. Someone here had to do it. “We need to get the others...”

“Zoro-sweetie and I will head back to Merry-chan.”

“I can go get everyone, ‘ttebayou.” Naruto volunteered. He quickly ran off to complete his task.

Vivi and Karoo followed along after them, feeling a bit awkward. Pudding was staring at her intently.

“So, you’re a princess?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Oh, how exciting! You can fight too?”

“...I can get by well enough.”

“Ah, it’s quite romantic. Just like an epic fairy tale.” Pudding sighed dreamily. “Let’s gossip and talk about the men in our lives, braid each other’s hair and do facials. I’ll make chocolate strawberries and marshmallows.” Pudding took Vivi’s hand in her own. “I’m looking forward to having another female friend.”

“Sure...” Vivi replied hesitantly. These Pirates were very strange.

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It wasn’t very long until the rest of the crew was gathered at the dock, and Sanji lamented having to carry a sleeping Gaara – he’d much rather be carrying either his Sweets-chan or Nami-swan!

Naruto had very excitably told a shortened version of what was going on. Well, Sanji wasn’t going to complain about a female member joining their crew – and to top it off, she was a princess! He laid Gaara against the crow’s nest, and muttered under his breath about the drool Gaara had left behind on his suit jacket.

Pudding happily approached Sanji and threw her arms around him. “Guess what, Sanji-dear? I got my hands on truffles from West Blue! Isn’t that amazing?”

“Whoa, really?” Sanji grinned and lifted Pudding up into a spin and hugged her. “Those are so rare!”

He was already thinking of the recipes they could make.

Not long after, Igaram appeared, dressed in drag, attempting to look like Vivi. He also had several large mannequin things dressed like the Straw Hats.

"I'll go, and draw attention away from you, so leave once I'm far enough away." Igaram said. "I'll see you later, Princess Vivi."

"Please, be careful, Igaram-san."

Vivi waved as Igaram sailed away. She desperately hoped that they could save their country. He was already several miles out thanks to a decent tailwind.

"When do you think we should head out?" Usopp asked, and he was likely addressing Nami.

Just then, a loud explosion rocked through the air, and lit up the sky.

"*IGARAM!!*" Vivi screamed. "Igaram, no!"

Luffy tried to reach out with his Mystery Power, but it was still muddled. "Dammit...!"

"My, my..." a new voice said. "How terrible."

The crew turned to see a woman sitting on the railing above them.

"You...you're Miss All Sunday!" Vivi said in horror. "She's Crocodile's partner!"

"And you're Alabasta's long-lost princess."

"Oi...you killed Igaram." Luffy looked ready to fight, when something pulled him down and his hat flew up to the woman.

"Now, now...behave yourself." Miss All Sunday admonished teasingly, as she placed the straw hat over her own cowboy hat.

"You give Luffy's hat back!" Naruto charged forward, when suddenly his hood was pulled over his head and something grabbed his foot as he was moving. He felt a tug on the front of his shirt and Naruto yelped as he was yanked forward. Embarrassingly, Naruto face-planted on the deck. He stared wide-eyed at the hands that held him down.

"Leave." Zoro said from behind the intruding woman, and for a brief second her mask of indifferent calm slipped. When and how had he

gotten behind her so fast? She eyed the blade that was level with her neck.

“Be careful...a woman’s pride is often connected to her hair.”

Several hands sprouted out of her back and shoved Zoro and his sword away, as more arms sprouted out of the wall and hugged Zoro in a way he couldn’t use his swords. His legs were still free, though. He struggled only briefly, and within seconds he ghosted out and several hands suddenly sprouted from his person and Zoro was twisted into a spinning motion that had him looking up at her from the deck.

“Bitch!” Zoro cursed as he tried to pull himself up, but several hands were holding him down.

“Oi, Cactus, don’t refer to beautiful women like that.” Sanji admonished.

It was a comment that went mostly ignored by Zoro, as he was wondering what the best course of action was. Try and kill this woman? Potentially reveal abilities that she could then inform Crocodile of if she managed to escape? Or would it be best to lay quietly and see what she does?

“Down boy.” Miss All Sunday scolded, before she turned back to the others. “Well, well...what a conundrum. Whatever shall we do?”

Miss All Sunday sprouted more arms as she passed Luffy’s hat back down to him.

Luffy grabbed the hat and inspected it for damage, and there was none; but there was an Eternal Pose in the hat.

“What’s this?” Luffy held up the Eternal Pose.

“Why, it’s to an island near Alabasta, called Nanimonai,” Miss All Sunday said as she inspected her fingernails. She patted both Zoro and Naruto on the head with one of her extra hands before releasing them. “I’m not going to do anything, so don’t worry.”

Zoro glared rusty kunai at the woman, but she seemed more amused than threatened.

“Why are you helping us...?” Vivi asked nervously. “*Are* you helping us?”

“Oh, Princess...” the woman spoke in a condescending, amused way, “Did you *really* think you found out Crocodile’s role all on your own? Who do you think informed Crocodile about spies being in his organization?”

Vivi gasped, and she felt sick. “This...this isn’t a game! There are people’s lives at stake!”

“It’s quite amusing, isn’t it?”

“Hey!” Luffy held up the Eternal Pose. “We don’t need this!” Luffy easily crushed the Eternal Pose, much to the bereavement of certain *nakama*. “You don’t decide our course!”

“Very well, then. I suppose I’ll see you soon, *Straw Hat* Luffy.”

The woman easily jumped from the ship to the dock, and she waved. Miss All Sunday then walked away, not giving them a second glance.

“We...we need to go.” Nami said. “Let’s move! I really wish you hadn’t broke that Eternal Pose, Luffy!”

Naruto then remembered something. He quickly ran to the bedroom, and began digging through one of the dresser drawers. He grinned when he found what he was looking for.

“Guys! Guys!” Naruto held up the Eternal Pose to Alabasta. “Ta-da~! We got this back when these people tried to recruit me an’ my brothers, ‘ttebayou!”

“An Eternal Pose...?!” Nami hugged Naruto, who blushed when his face was pushed against Nami’s chest. Sanji clenched his fist and grumbled bitterly. “Oh, Naruto! This is great!” Nami turned on Luffy with a snarl, “Don’t you *dare* break this one!”

“Fine, fine...” Luffy wisely backed away so he couldn’t be accused of anything.

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When Gaara woke up, he was extremely confused. Miss Wednesday was here? On their ship? Everyone was being pretty friendly with her. Gaara was immediately suspicious. What was she trying to do?

“Quack!”

Gaara turned and...his eyes widened. Was that a giant duck?

Karoo was busy watching the ocean, and occasionally, dolphins or some other sea creature would leap from the waves. The duck flinched when a hand suddenly touched his tail. He turned to see a strange, redheaded child run his hand through Karoo's tail feathers.

"So soft..." the boy murmured.

His eyes slowly glanced up at Karoo, and the two had a staring match. Karoo was the first to blink. The boy then reached up for Karoo's face, and he smiled somewhat as his hand ran along Karoo's bill.

"Oh, morning, Gaara!" Usopp greeted. He grinned. "You like Karoo, huh?"

Gaara scowled a little, and with clear reluctance admitted, "He's fluffy."

Karoo looked a little proud.

Gaara then turned to glare at Miss Wednesday. "Why's *she* here?"

Usopp didn't know that there could be so much vindictiveness in a simple, three word question.

"Well, that's Vivi. We're helping her save her country from a Warlord called Crocodile," Usopp bolstered himself up, "But not to worry, I've fought against a Warlord before and was made Chief, so you have nothing to worry about."

Gaara cocked his head. "...You're a Chief?"

"Of course!" Usopp went on to tell a story of conquering a Warlord who had abused his power over a tribe. The Great Usopp had come along, and as thanks, he was made their Chief. It was truly one of his more incredible tales.

"Then...if you have this entire tribe at your disposal, why don't you have them help us fight this Warlord?" Gaara genuinely asked. "Uh...uh..." Usopp glanced around frantically. "What was that? Luffy? Luffy's calling me! Gotta go!"

Gaara watched Usopp leave, with his brow furrowed.

\ ***"You do realize he was lying about the Chief thing, right?"*** \

Gaara didn't answer for a moment before he gave a hesitant '...yes?' in response.

Ichibi grumbled under his breath.

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Vivi sat down at the base of the crow's nest, and held her face in her hands. She was exhausted and confused. Igaram was dead. Miss All Sunday had played them for however long; and Igaram had likely died for nothing.

But, she was determined. Vivi *would* save her people.

"I guess you're traveling with us now."

The voice jilted Vivi into sitting up, and she stared into unblinking, sea-green eyes. Something sunk in Vivi's stomach once she really focused on the fact. This boy...he was just a child. Why was he *here* of all places? Plus, Naruto... It made Vivi wonder what had exactly happened to them that resulted in them becoming Pirates.

She stole a glance over at a snoring Zoro...they shared his family name, but they certainly didn't look related.

"Usopp told me everything," the boy was rolling a ball of sand in his hands. "Captain told me we're going to help you. And Nami wants money for us helping you."

"Sorry...but your name...? Forgive me, I don't remember..." Vivi said with a small smile.

He clenched tightly at the sand. "Roronoa Gaara."

Gaara scowled up at her. The glare was akin to an angry raccoon.

"I can smell you. You tried to kill Zoro-nii."

Vivi swallowed audibly, and sweat rolled down the back of her neck.

"But...the others seem to like you...and you..." Gaara turned away and scowled for a moment, "you have that giant duck..."

"You like Karoo?" Vivi asked with a small smile.

Gaara made a face at her that pretty much answered her question. That got her smile to widen a little.

He wouldn't look at her as he muttered, "If you do anything to Captain or the others, I'll kill you."

Nami suddenly approached Gaara from behind and hugged him. “You’re so cute when you’re threatening people, Gaara-kun!” Nami tone turned scolding, somewhat. “But don’t threaten my massive payday, okay?”

Gaara’s face burned. “I-I’m not cute!”

Vivi blinked at the change in Gaara’s attitude. He was now pouting and glaring at the deck, but was making no effort to pull away from Nami. Vivi covered her mouth to hide her smile that was now a full-on grin. This strange boy certainly cared about his crew.

“Don’t complain when you’re being embraced by a beautiful woman, kid.” Sanji sagely advised as he set down a tray of drinks. He fawned over Vivi, saying, “Vivi-chan, I made this just for you~! Please enjoy it!”

Vivi slowly sipped the creamy drink that was offered, and it was delicious! It was sweet and refreshing.

Since Pudding did that strange memory technique on the Unluckies, they at least had more of a chance. But Vivi still wondered how much of a chance they actually had. What if Miss All Sunday told Crocodile about them? These people were just a ragtag group of Pirates going up against a Warlord. Did they even stand a chance?

Vivi took a deep breath, and clasped her hands, muttering a prayer under her breath. She had to have hope. She had to believe that everything would be fine. They could save her country, and Crocodile would be exposed.

“You seem to have a lot on your mind, Vivi-chan.”

The voice brought Vivi out of her spiraling thoughts. She glanced up at Pudding, who simply sat down next to her, and offered a plate of some sort of dessert.

Vivi took a bite, and gasped. It tasted wonderful! It rivaled the food at the palace. Vivi wondered if Sanji and Pudding knew how to cook Alabastian recipes. She could ask, and make sure it didn’t indispose the two.

“It’ll be okay, you know.” Pudding said with a nod. “Luffy-sweetie is strong. I wouldn’t have chosen just *any* handsome man to follow if I didn’t believe he was worth it.”

“I just...” Vivi started, “I don’t want anyone to die in this war, and Miss All Sunday knowing that we’re coming...I thought we’d at least have the element of surprise, but she could very well have told Crocodile we were coming...and if she doesn’t, why?”

“Heh, it shouldn’t matter whether or not he knows we’re coming.” Pudding replied. “Like in baking, you have the traditional tart – they’re usually sweet and savory. But sometimes,” Pudding offered another one of the desserts to Vivi who graciously accepted it – and was surprised that it was actually sweet and spicy. Pudding smirked, “...what you expect isn’t always what you get.”

Vivi started laughing – she didn’t know why. Whether it was the analogy, or that Pudding looked so smug at her surprise, Vivi wasn’t sure. But Pudding looked very pleased.

“There we are, that’s a better look on you.”

Vivi sent Pudding a questioning look.

“The brooding mood doesn’t suit you, and I’d much rather my rivals be up to snuff.”

“What.”

“Nobody’s a rival...” Nami muttered rather pointlessly.

Ignoring Nami, Pudding presented Gaara with a few of the desserts, “I know you don’t like things so sweet, so I adjusted the recipe. Tell me what you think?”

Vivi had to admit that she felt a little more relaxed now. She had to keep her spirits up for the sake of her people!

Chapter End Notes

An Author’s Rambles

Reading about how people get freaked out about scaphism...
hehehehe...

For those who were curious, I got the basic info from Rob Gavagan on YouTube. He has all sorts of lists of horror-related topics and then some.

There is more coming from the Elemental Nations, but that will appear in Tales of the Ninja. I didn’t want this story to get bogged down going back and forth too much, and I wanted to be able to focus on the Ninja.

Gaara will find his true dream very soon.

Naruto has a lot of work ahead of him. He didn't anticipate the full extent of that.

Pudding finds another "rival". Poor Vivi.

I'm changing Robin's fighting style up a tiny bit. I think in canon, her techniques are very cool, and I'm expanding what she does with all those extra limbs.

Luffy had to have a reason for not being able to sense Igaram, so alcohol-brain it is.

Gaara likes Nami, and is willing to indulge her. He views her like the older sister he never had. (Somewhere in the Elemental

Nations, Temari feels a pain in her chest, and doesn't know why)

Naruto's attack: Descending sparrow strike - Kōka suzume sutoraiku-jutsu

Stalk me on Tumblr if you so desire:

Main: [adorkablemamebean](#)

Everything writing: [texasbeanwrites-stuffhere](#)

In Which Luffy is a Selfish Captain and Causes People on his Crew to Cry

Chapter Summary

After encountering a Weather Spot, the Straw Hats must make an impromptu stop at Little Garden to make repairs. While there, they encounter Giants, along with Baroque Works Agents who take advantage of the situation. Meanwhile, long-forgotten memories within the Bijuu begin to stir.

The Agents find themselves in a perilous situation that they weren't prepared for.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Ye be warned, dear readers; lots of violence and colorful language ahead.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously:

"Well, isn't that touching?" Taizo mocked with a sneer, knowing that Sumie was taking care of the others, if that scream was any indication. "I'm gonna enjoy killing you while making your precious Zabuza-sama-"

Something vile suddenly filled the air, and a suffocating, hopeless dread washed over them as a pain-filled roar echoed through the valley. Taizo was cut off when some sort of glowing red object slammed into him just seconds later. Taizo screamed when his arm was ripped from its socket, and it was tossed a fair distance away.

Isha, Koba and Buri just stared in shock, the events not really registering in their minds.

The situation would have been almost morbidly comical, if it hadn't been done by an eight-year-old blond boy.

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"So, you can navigate, right?" Johnny asked, concern evident in his voice. "When I say that, I mean, beyond the basics of well, sailing out here in East Blue."

"Yeah," Yosaku agreed. "You do realize how dangerous the oceans are in

the Grand Line? And don't get me started on some of the stories I've heard about the islands!"

"Is it really that dangerous?" Naruto asked.

"Naruto-nii-chan, when people go to the Grand Line, they want actual navigators!" Yosaku replied. "There are stories of people getting lost at sea or shipwrecked, and those are the tame ways for people's adventures to end."

Johnny was speaking now, "I've heard that in the Grand Line, there's a phenomenon called "Weather Spots" – or "patches". Basically, they're areas varying in sizes where multiple types of weather exist at once."

The man nodded gravely, to show the seriousness of the conversation. "These patches can last several minutes, and at that time, they can tear ships like ours apart."

"It's not that big a deal," Zoro said with a yawn. "We'll just sail around 'em."

"Aniki, these patches are entirely unpredictable!" Yosaku nearly shouted. "That's what makes them so dangerous! You can't just see them and decide to sail around them! You'll never know when they'll happen, how big they are or how long they'll last!"

Zoro frowned. "We're in the ocean, and those storms are in the sky. All we've gotta do is just cut through it."

"You can't just-!" Johnny started, but then he stopped, and briefly removed his glasses so that he could pinch the bridge of his nose. Replacing his glasses, Johnny spoke slowly, "Aniki... you're an amazing swordsman – incredible, even. But you can't just cut through one of those storms like that. I mean, I've heard of people dealing with typhoons, ice storms, and giant waves, all at once. Those things alone wreck ships."

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Later that evening, the crew were settling in for the night; and Usopp suggested they play a game.

“Oh, we can play the shadow puppet game with Gaara’s sand!” Naruto announced. “Luffy and I are on the same team, ‘tebayou!”

With Luffy and Usopp’s help, they set up a curtain and lantern so Gaara could make his sand-shadows.

“Oh, how fun!” Pudding settled down on a cushion, and leaned on Sanji when he sat down next to her. Sanji looked very pleased, but that changed within seconds when the Chef overheard Zoro make a comment about his “stupid” expression under his breath.

The two started arguing and insulting each other.

“OI! Cut it out!” Nami demanded, slapping the two people who apparently liked swapping the likely malfunctioning shared brain cell between them.

“Of course, Nami-swan~” Sanji complied.

“Whatever, sea witch,” griped Zoro.

Nami raised an eyebrow when Pudding was glaring at her...sort of pouting?

“What?” Nami asked.

“Oh, nothing...ha, ha...” Pudding waved Nami off, but still... Nami thought it was a bit peculiar.

“Since there’s so many people here now, I can just sit this one out.” Zoro settled down on some crates and was promptly asleep.

Nami quickly nabbed Vivi as her partner, and seriously...could anyone else guess what Gaara’s shapes were? She was curious.

Usopp was wondering if he would have to be a third member on a team, when Nami spoke up, “Usopp-kun, you should write down stuff for Gaara to make with his sand to ensure there’s no cheating.”

Usopp thought that Nami was one to talk, but he didn’t dare voice that aloud.

“Okay...?” Usopp had a chalkboard and chalk on hand, so he sat down in front of Gaara, but his back was to the others. Usopp at least wanted to be able to see the sand-shadows for himself. He decided to go for something simple, first.

He wrote down, ‘horse’ and Gaara’s sand formed... Usopp made a face. How was *that* a horse? Was Gaara being serious right now? It looked more like a lumpy seal.

“It’s a beautiful girl lounging!” A hesitant pause. “I think...?”

“Is it a turkey?” Pudding asked.

“Um...” Vivi glanced at Nami, as if trying to ask for some sort of answer. “It’s a...dog?”

“It’s a horse!” Luffy called out excitedly.

“Luffy’s right!” Usopp said, marking down a point while Naruto whooped.

For the next one, Usopp wrote down *‘flower’*, but Gaara sent him a frown.

Whispering, Gaara said, “There’s lots of those...which one do I make?”

Shrugging, Usopp said, “Whatever you want?”

Gaara made a face at him, then looked thoughtful.

The sand formed, and the guesses were:

“Windmill.”

“Lion.”

“Cat.”

“Seaweed.”

And someone even tried guessing that Gaara was going for a profile of himself. Even Karoo tried to offer a few helpful squawks to no avail. Personally, Usopp thought that the flower looked like a deformed wind-chime thingy?

It was Luffy to happily announce, “Cactus flower!”

“Captain got it right...” Gaara looked very pleased.

Usopp marked down another point. The game only lasted a few more rounds; because only Luffy was guessing correctly, and everyone else was so far off in their own guesses they didn’t really have a chance of winning.

The next game became cards, where Sanji started teaching the others about various kinds of poker.

It was a lot easier to win this game.

Luffy proved to be terrible at any variation of poker they were playing, because he kept unintentionally revealing his cards. Whether it was accidentally showing off his hand; or making an expression when he had a decent hand, Luffy kept losing. He was never good at this game. Both Sabo and Ace had never been able to get Luffy to break his bad habits, no matter how hard they'd tried.

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Vivi admittedly watched the odd scene before her with growing confusion. She even gave the other Pirates a questioning look. Not even they seemed to know what was going on. Their group sat in the kitchen observing the resident Chefs as they made breakfast; their coordination was almost like a dance.

"Oh, Sanji-dear!" Pudding was blushing nearly as red as the tomatoes that Sanji was chopping. "There's something I have to tell you..." Pudding paused for a moment.

Sanji paused as well to look at the woman at his side. "Yes, Pudding-chan?"

"I...I want to prepare meals by your side...I love doing it...together..."

"Are you saying...?" Sanji sounded surprised. "You really want to be with me like that?"

"Only if you want to..."

"Of course, Sweets-chan!" Sanji began to sway and his eyes turned into hearts. "I'll make you delicious meals all the time!"

Sanji calmed down for a moment to have Pudding sample something.

"Oh, Sanji-dear!" Pudding's eyes also flashed into hearts. "You really know the way into a girl's heart!"

"Are you guys seriously confessing to each other *again*, 'ttebayou?" Naruto made a face that showed his opinion on love and all that romance-shomance stuff.

"We confessed to each other?" Pudding asked curiously.

"When did that happen?" Sanji asked as he expertly stirred and flipped the food in the frying pan.

"Yes, you did!" Usopp said. "I was *there*!"

"I guess we did." Sanji agreed, completely monotone.

"It's so sweet of you to remember!" Pudding praised, but somehow Usopp felt that she was teasing him.

"You guys are weird." Gaara said.

Zoro's simple opinion was, "It's too early in the morning for this shit."

"So...you two *are* a couple, right?" Vivi asked slowly, trying to make sure that she was keeping up with the conversation.

"People seem to think that we are." Pudding whispered like it was a silly rumor going around.

"It would be nice if Pudding-chan saw me that way." Sanji sighed wistfully.

"But you *just* confessed!" Usopp and even Nami, shouted.

"Now, now," Pudding plated some food. She sent Nami a very pointed look. "Shouting is very unbecoming. So is growling and glaring... unless that is your...you know...*thing*?"

Nami looked ready to stab Pudding with the fork that she was bending with one hand.

"I'll confess my love for you anytime, Nami-swan!" Sanji practically danced around Nami. "You're still beautiful even when you're angry, Nami-swan! It shows your passion!"

Nami's eyebrow twitched and she groaned as she dropped her head into her hands.

Luffy mostly ignored everyone's antics since he was looking forward to breakfast. But he smiled as the various emotions emanating from his crew washed over him and made the hair and the back of his neck tingle – it was a happy, peaceful feeling. Their emotions made him laugh quite genuinely.

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"I can navigate if you have to go," Zoro offered to Nami when she mentioned having to use the restroom really quick.

"No, Nami!" Naruto quickly protested. "You don't want to do that, 'ttebayou!"

“If your goal is to get us lost in the darkest depths of the ocean never to be found, Zoro-nii will surely lead us there.”

“Oi, you brats!” Zoro also protested. “I don’t get lost!”

Naruto then began to do a very spot-on imitation of Zoro. Which really involved him looking grumpy and scowling. “Look at that amazing cloud, it’s going places. Let’s follow it and see where the cloud takes us. Who cares about the Log Pose? Don’t need it, it’s probably defective anyway.”

“I don’t get lost.” Gaara deadpanned in an equally spot-on impression of Zoro. “It’s just the birds looked like they knew where they were going. Not my fault we ended up in North Blue.”

Zoro finger-flicked the two on their foreheads. “Dumbass brats, quit exaggerating!”

“...you got lost in the desert. It was a few hours before you showed up again. I had to hold your hand.”

“There was that time you got lost at that inn. You wandered around for *hours*, ‘ttebayou.”

“There was the time you wandered into Kimimaro’s sex house. He was thankful for it, though.”

“And when we first started traveling together you thought the map was defective. You’re the one who’s defective, ‘ttebayou.”

“You’re defective, brat!”

Naruto jumped on top of Zoro to pull his hair, while Zoro yanked Naruto off of his shoulders and proceeded to sit on top of him.

“Get off of me, ttebayou!”

Naruto managed to swap with one of the barrels; and both he and Zoro had an inelegant squabble as Naruto pulled at Zoro’s face, and Zoro managed to twist Naruto off. Their impromptu wrestling match was interrupted by commentary:

“Wow, you couldn’t find your way out of a wet cardboard box blindfolded, could you, you shitty, grumpy cactus?”

“Oh, you poor thing...” Pudding shook her head. She smiled coyly “I wouldn’t mind if we got lost together somewhere exotic...hot and

sticky..." Pudding began to blush as she imagined it. Though, in her imagination, they'd have to strip down to the bare minimum for one reason or another. Their survival depended on it.

First, Zoro yelled at Sanji, "Shut it, you third-rate cook."

Then he had to glare at Pudding.

"What are you even imagining?!" Zoro demanded, because he noticed how Pudding was staring at him.

Luffy simply laughed. Vivi at least had the courtesy to cover her mouth.

Zoro glared at the crew. Damn them all, thinking he got lost! Wasn't his fault the storeroom moved and he ended up in the crow's nest... just earlier that day...

Zoro dropped Naruto on the deck, and Naruto kicked Zoro's leg. Naruto stuck his tongue out, and Zoro flipped him off.

"Stupid-lost Zoro-nii!"

"Damn brat."

With that, their little wrestling match was over. Luffy found it amusing and was nostalgic over his own brothers, while Nami rolled her eyes and muttered, "Ugh, boys."

"We can navigate," Naruto indicated Gaara and himself.

A grateful Nami handed them the Log Pose, and quickly ran to the bathroom. She'd only be a few minutes; what could go wrong?

*0*0*

Nami had just finished washing her hands, and paused for a moment to admire her reflection. Yes, she'd be the first to admit she was vain. She admired her tan; something she hadn't really been able to acquire due to constantly hiding Arlong's mark unless she absolutely needed it to be exposed.

Turning to go back, the ship suddenly lurched and Nami was slammed into the wall. She nearly hit the mirror with the back of her head before she managed to grab the towel rack to break her fall. She breathed a sigh of relief that nothing was broken. She heard shouting outside, and the ship lurched once more. Nami began making her way

outside as quickly as possible; using the walls as support, when the air hit her.

Oh, no...

Nami increased her pace. The air had a heaviness to it and the smell of salt and rain was intense. Shit, this was a Weather Spot!

“Get the ropes!” someone was shouting.

“Look out!”

Nami watched as Zoro cut hail that was easily twice the size of their ship in half. It fell on either side of Merry, and the resulting waves soaked the crew even more. Gaara immediately raised a cover of sand over Merry, and that at least kept them dry from the pouring rain overhead along with making it easier to see.

The wind was whipping every which way, making it impossible to harness the wind and sail out.

“Good job, Gaara!” Nami quickly took over and analyzed the weather and the ocean for a few seconds. They had heavy winds and rain, hail – and thanks to the hail, an iceberg field to navigate. “Alright, everyone, point the ship ten degrees starboard! You guys need to hold the sails steady! Naruto, do that wind blast thing from before when I give the signal!”

“*Hai!*” Naruto got into position.

Everyone braced themselves, and it was at that moment a large hail that was half the size of their ship hit the front of Gaara’s shield and fell into the ocean and bobbed out of the water. At the same time, Merry was rocked forward thanks to a large wave; and the hail struck Merry’s figurehead.

The crew went wide-eyed as the figurehead was knocked back onto the deck, and Usopp was shaking at the close call of almost being crushed by an oversized sheep-head.

“My special seat!” Luffy lamented.

There was another crack, and several boards near the bow began to slowly crack and splinter. Luffy moved to wrap his arms around Merry’s front just in case; but he gave an audible sigh of relief when it appeared that Merry wasn’t going to split in half.

Nami pushed wet bangs out of her eyes, relieved that they weren't shipwrecked right then and there. The ship rocked as it was pointed in the direction they needed to go, and Nami called out with a chopping motion of her hand, "Now!"

Merry rocketed forward, and it was just enough to escape the Weather Spot. But Nami didn't like how close the storm still was, and the ocean continued rocking them somewhat violently.

"Naruto, do another one!"

An out-of-breath Naruto managed another, albeit weaker, *Wind Blast*. Afterwards, Naruto collapsed and began coughing, and spit out a bit of blood. He had overexerted himself and strained his lungs, but he would be fine in an hour or so thanks to Kyuubi.

Kyuubi didn't really appreciate the casual attitude Naruto had about his healing. He found himself being thankful for the Navigator woman, though.

"Oh, Naruto!" Nami was at his side the moment she noticed. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize you would strain yourself like this!" Her worried voice went to sounding annoyed. "You should have told me!"

"I'll be fine, 'ttebayou..." Naruto wheezed.

Nami ruffled his hair affectionately, but she was exasperated all the same. "You guys are all such stubborn idiots."

Then, Nami focused on the real issue. Merry wasn't in the best shape, and by her calculations, they were still about two weeks away from Alabasta. It clearly wasn't a good idea to sail with a ship in this state, anyway. So that meant repairs. But it equally wasn't a good idea for them to sit in the middle of the ocean trying to repair their ship even if there were people who could stand on the water.

Marines, Sea Kings, other hungry ocean predators... Shuddering at the thought, it was a chance she wasn't willing to take.

Nami checked the Log Pose around her wrist, and hoped that they could lock onto an island where they could do repairs.

"How bad is the damage?" Nami questioned, as Usopp and Luffy moved the figurehead someplace where it would be out of the way.

"Well...we aren't going to split, thankfully." Usopp replied with a

huff. "I can repair what I can if we dock somewhere...I want to repair Merry right away!"

Nami hummed in agreement. At least there were a few people who could be counted on in situations like this.

As Luffy lamented his special seat, he frowned at Gaara who had a very sullen feeling about him.

"Gaara?" Luffy questioned. "You okay?"

Gaara nodded, but Luffy felt as if the boy weren't being honest with him.

Sensing that something was obviously bothering him, Zoro ruffled Gaara's hair. "That was quick thinking, sand-brat."

Gaara gave a half-smile, but continued looking bothered.

"I'm sorry..." Gaara mumbled, "If I had spread my sand out a bit more then Merry wouldn't have gotten damaged..."

All the ways he could have done at least the smallest thing differently went through his mind.

"Hey, no-one could've anticipated how that hail was going to jet out like that." Usopp said. "Freak accident."

"We would have sunk if it weren't for your sand, Gaara-san!" Vivi agreed.

"Where's your usual 'that hail could have turned us into jelly for sharks' kinda attitude?" Usopp asked.

Gaara looked up at Usopp. "Do I really sound like that?"

"Oh? My impression of you was very good, wasn't it?" Usopp looked very proud of himself.

Smiling a little, Gaara said, "You actually made me sound very optimistic."

That caused Usopp to splutter. "*Optimistic?! Oi. Are you serious?*"

Studying the Log Pose, Nami felt a sense of relief when she saw how the needle moved. It had already locked onto an island, and they should only be a day or so away. Hopefully...

“We should repair what we can so Luffy doesn’t have to hold on like this,” Sanji recommended, and Usopp nailed a few planks together as a temporary fix; while Gaara switched places with Luffy so he could hold Merry together with his sand. It was more of a cautious thing than it was a necessity

“I won’t know how bad the damage is underneath until we reach the island...” Usopp sighed. “At least we have plenty of materials in case of emergency, but I didn’t think we’d be using them so fast...”

That run-in with Laboon had barely even been a week ago.

“My special seat...” Luffy bemoaned very dramatically. He hugged Merry’s head and sadly ran his fingers over the patterns Gaara had carved into the woodwork.

“You can pout later, Luffy.” Nami said authoritatively. “Right now, we have to set sail – and Naruto’s too worn out to help.”

Glancing over at Naruto, who wasn’t breathing as hard as he had been; but he was still clearly recovering. Luffy was on his feet in seconds. “Yosh~!”

He was the Captain and his crew was relying on him! Luffy quickly set to work helping with the sails. They had to fix Merry and get back to their adventure as quickly as possible.

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The crew reached the island by midafternoon. It was amazing! Luffy looked excited at all the palm trees that covered the island – and – he looked especially starry-eyed at the giant dragonfly that flew overhead. Even Usopp was impressed and tentatively excited. The two teens could definitely agree on the insects being really cool.

Nami and Vivi both shivered at the loud noise it made, while Pudding had a thoughtful look. “That dragonfly was big enough to eat...I wonder how it tastes?”

“We aren’t eating bugs!” Nami openly gagged.

“Insects are actually very nutritious, and some can taste like beef, depending on how they’re prepared.” Vivi happily informed Nami. “They’re actually quite tasty...fried scorpion is my favorite.”

Nami sent Vivi a glare as if the other girl had betrayed her somehow.

“There are plenty of cultures that have insects as a primary part of their diet, Nami-chan.” Pudding informed happily. “You should expand your pallet. There are even some insects that have aphrodisiac properties. There are even a few that help people relax. You could certainly benefit from them.”

“I don’t want them!” Nami protested quite loudly. “We aren’t eating bugs!”

“Why does everyone have to be so loud?” Zoro complained under his breath. He just wanted to nap. Was that too much to ask?

Following Nami’s directions, Sanji steered Merry through a canal that would allow them to hide.

Luffy was bouncing in place. “Adventure! Adventure!” Turning very dramatically to point at the two most important people on his ship, Luffy issued a Captain’s command: “Sanji! Pudding! We need adventure bento!”

“Oh, wonderful!” Pudding was enthusiastic. “I’ll make some delicious desserts that’ll keep everyone cool in this heat.”

“Yay!” Luffy cheered and hugged Pudding by wrapping his arms around her several times, causing her to blush deeply. “You’re the best, Pudding!”

Pudding’s arms were pinned to her sides by her Captain! She couldn’t move! His face was *right there* next to hers!

This was something Luffy had seen Shanks doing with Makino almost all the time when the two of them were together – and Makino always seemed pleased. So, Luffy gave Pudding a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Oh...my...Lu-Luffy!” Pudding looked very happy as her face turned impossibly redder. Blood spirt out of her nose and Pudding collapsed into a faint; her eyes shaped like hearts.

“Ah!” Luffy quickly released Pudding. “Pudding?! What happened?”

He gave her a few tentative slaps on the cheek. “Pudding?”

Pudding’s emotions had gone wild and then she had fainted, with a pleased grin on her face... Why?! Was she sick?

Pudding sprung to her feet looking determined. “Anything for you,

Luffy-sweetie! I'll even find some new ingredients here to make even more desserts for you to savor."

That of course got Luffy very excited and he whooped.

The small commotion caused the members of the crew who witnessed it to stop and stare.

Twirling a lock of her hair, Pudding said, "You're such a tease, Luffy-sweetie."

"Huh?" Luffy tilted his head clearly confused. "I'm not teasing you... Shanks would kiss Makino like that all the time...it was because he appreciated her, right? I appreciate you."

"You shouldn't play with a woman's heart like that, Luffy-sweetie." Pudding said with a wink as she tapped Luffy's nose and then turned towards the kitchen.

Luffy honestly looked confused. How was he playing with Pudding's heart?

Sanji pressed his foot against Luffy's face. "You shitty bastard, appreciate being that close to Pudding-chan more!"

"What'd I do?" Luffy's muffled voice asked.

Sanji fixed Luffy with a meaningful glare, but that only confused Luffy even more. He felt like Sanji was trying to tell him *something*, but Luffy couldn't figure it out for the life of him... He *did* appreciate Pudding! He *had* said so!

Shoving off of Luffy, Sanji practically danced after Pudding. "Wait for me, Sweets-chan!"

"Sanji-dear! What shall we make today?"

"We have lots of leftovers that still need to be used..." Sanji turned around to announce giddily, "I'll make delicious food for you ladies!" He made sure to scowl at the others. "You shitty bastards will just have to be satisfied with getting their scraps."

The two disappeared into the kitchen, and left Luffy scratching his head. His crew could be so confusing sometimes. But Sanji and Pudding were making food, so Luffy simply began excitedly chanting "food" to himself.

With a sigh, Usopp grabbed his toolkit and said, “Gaara, will you lift Merry up again? I want to make sure that there’s no damage on the bottom. I wonder if we should probably get some wood while we’re here as well...”

Gaara nodded, happy to be of help.

While Nami didn’t even dare thinking of leaving the ship; she’d much rather stay here! Not only was the ship clearly the safest place to be on this island, but Gaara’s sand would protect them as well if something big attacked them.

Nami began making navigation plans so they could reach Alabasta in a short amount of time. She wanted to leave as soon as possible, mostly because the sounds of the jungle were already freaking her out, and it was in the middle of the afternoon!

Luffy, Naruto, Vivi, and Karoo had gotten their adventure bento, and were off gallivanting somewhere in this gods-forsaken island.

Somehow, Zoro and Sanji had gotten into an argument and went running off to complete some sort of ridiculous hunting challenge.

Gaara could do nothing but watch as Zoro disappeared into the jungle; he could only hope that Zoro wouldn’t wander off and disappear for hours or days.

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With Luffy and his companions, they were gathering various fruits and interesting looking things that Pudding had tasked them with finding since they were exploring the island anyway.

Even though Nami had expressed concern for something being poisoned, Pudding didn’t seem all that concerned. It was a chance for new recipes, and there were ways to tell if something was inedible or not.

Luffy suddenly cried out and pointed, “Dinosaur!”

Vivi’s eyes widened. If they weren’t careful, they could get crushed!

“...Whoa, that thing’s as big as a mountain, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto was ecstatic. They were *so* tall! How did their necks support their heads? How much did these dinosaurs eat? Were dinosaurs the kings of the land?

Luffy suddenly swung up onto one of the dinosaurs' heads. Vivi wasn't *too* concerned...yet. Naruto was cheering Luffy on. But then when Luffy went to swing from one dinosaur neck to the other, one dinosaur was probably annoyed by the action, and promptly ate Luffy.

"HE DID *NOT* JUST GET EATEN!" Vivi screeched.

Karoo looked just as shocked.

"AHHHH!" Naruto yelled and jumped off of Karoo's back. "LUFFY! Can he get out?! Is he gonna have to be pooped out?!" Naruto stopped to think. "Can I cut Luffy out?"

It seemed that Naruto wouldn't have to try, because someone else came along and cut the dinosaur's neck. Disgustingly, Luffy popped out of the bottom of the decapitated head's neck.

Landing with a grunt, Luffy glanced around curiously to see that he was in a very large hand...

"...Whoa..." Luffy stared at his rescuer.

"*Gegyagyayga!*" the man's laugh seemed to shake the earth.

"That...that's a *Giant!*" Vivi gasped in awe.

Naruto stared. The man was ridiculously *huge!* He was the size of Kyuubi!

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Dorry laughed in his unique way as he led the Humans to his side of the island. The Giant easily carried the dinosaur over his shoulder. The Humans and the duck rode on his other shoulder; otherwise, they would never have been able to keep up.

The boys were fascinated by Dorry; asking question after question. It was entertaining answering their questions and listening to them in return.

They sat down for a meal, and Dorry prepared the dinosaur. The fire he set up was more like a large bonfire, than it was for cooking a meal.

Dorry placed a large chunk of meat in front of the Humans. While Vivi took a small portion, Luffy and Naruto started a competition to see how much they could eat.

“Gegyagyagya! You two eat like Giants! Splendid!”

In return for the dino-meat, Luffy and the others offered up their meals; knowing that Sanji and Pudding could just prepare something for them again. It was very amusing, though, that the meals were more like crumbs compared to what Dorry had given them.

He was appreciative non-the-less, and savored the offered food.

Dorry told them several stories about Elbaf, which made him a bit homesick, but revisiting his old memories was a welcome topic.

“Oh, Luffy! I wanna go to Elbaf someday!” Naruto was fired up! This land of Giants sounded truly amazing!

“Yeah, of course we’re going!” Luffy declared. “I read that Gold Roger was there.”

That of course led them to talk a bit about the Pirate King, and how Dorry himself used to be a Pirate.

“I guess I sort of am?” Dorry ran a hand along his beard thoughtfully. “I haven’t stirred up trouble for a long time, so maybe people think I’ve either retired or up and died! Gegyagyagya!”

This of course led to him telling them about his ongoing rivalry with another Giant on the island, Brogy; because the Humans were wondering what exactly made Dorry go into sort-of-retirement.

Vivi was horrified. “How can you spend so many years hating someone?! Why are you even fighting?!”

She was appalled that Dorry had the audacity to laugh at such a notion.

Inside his prison, Kyuubi could only snort in amusement. Foolish girl. She saw only violence and hatred. Giants fought with honor and pride – no matter how small the slight was. Disagreements were dealt with by weapons or fists, and hardly ever words. A person’s pride and convictions were important; and it was important to stand by them; to fight until the other person relented; it was not always about hatred or bloodshed.

Humans did not always understand these notions, and...

Kyuubi’s thoughts stalled...how did he know all of that?

A memory stirred from deep within his mind:

*A Giant sat down beside Kyuubi. The smell of death and rot was in the air.
“This isn’t what I wanted, Kyuubi-sama.”*

Then like that, it was gone.

Kyuubi snorted, and shook his head. What *was* that? Something uncomfortable stirred in his gut. Knowing he had memories about Giants...and there was a Giant right *there*... He had seen Giants before, several times, in fact. Kyuubi felt that the memory was important. It was frustrating, so, so frustrating, knowing that he had a memory but couldn’t seem to reach it.

Naruto’s consciousness reached out to him, wondering if he was okay.

/ ***“I’m fine...”*** / Kyuubi lied. There wasn’t an easy way to explain this. Naruto simply couldn’t understand something like this. He had the distinct feeling that Naruto didn’t believe him.

He was thankful that Naruto didn’t push.

Outside, Vivi demanded, “Why are you even fighting in the first place?!”

The volcano erupted just then, and Dorry stood. Something about how he stood was different. The air around him seemed to physically shift. Dorry raised his weapon at the ready as he smirked in anticipation.

“Well, to be honest...” he charged forward, “I don’t remember!”

When the two Giants clashed, everyone could feel how the energy rippled through the air.

“Wow...” Naruto’s jaw dropped. His voice was barely a whisper. “That’s amazing, ‘ttebayou...”

“I don’t really get it,” Vivi said, as she sat down rather huffily.

“It’s a fight between men, Vivi!” Luffy said. “It’s their pride, ya know?”

“Couldn’t they just you know, talk it out?” Vivi cringed a bit when the air rippled again and the sound of steel meeting steel echoed around them.

“Hmmm...” Luffy poked his head as he began to think. “Well...maybe

they don't have the words? They talk with their fights. I didn't feel anything like they want to hurt each other... Dorry was really *happy*."

"...Well...I can't claim to understand it, but..." Vivi smiled a little. "If they don't want to hurt each other..."

"Oh!" Luffy turned to his friends, saying, "We should get a barrel of alcohol from the ship! I bet he'll enjoy that! I'll be right back!"

Luffy ran off towards the ship, eager for Dorry to have some of the alcohol. A barrel would certainly be far better than the tiny lunches that unfortunately didn't do his Chefs the justice their cooking deserved. Pudding had been very selective when it came to choosing the alcohol.

The volcano went off again, not long after.

Dorry came back and plopped down, shaking the jungle around him; causing birds and various other creatures to burst out of their hiding spots and loudly complain about being disrupted.

It was a good thing his Human companions were sitting, otherwise they would have fallen down.

"Luffy went to get you some of our alcohol," Vivi said before Dorry could ask.

Naruto sighed loudly as he stood up and stretched. "I'm bored...I'm gonna go explore for a bit!"

"Naruto, you can't..." Vivi started, but Naruto just blew a raspberry and waved her off.

"I can fight; I'm not Zoro-nii, I don't get lost, and..." Naruto waved a hand at Dorry, "There're *two* Giants here, so nothin' to worry about, 'ttebayou!"

Dorry laughed at Naruto's reasoning, while Vivi raised an eyebrow.

"I can talk more to Dorry later, and 'sides," Naruto felt he had to point something very important out, "this is the *first* island we've been to – and Whiskey Peak doesn't count! I wanna explore!"

"Fine, fine." Vivi relented. "Just be careful! Either come back here or go with the others, alright?"

Vivi would have continued talking about the dangers and not going

off alone just in case, but Naruto had disappeared into the trees with a whoop.

Watching as Naruto began sticking to the trees as he leapt through the foliage, Dorry commented, "...What an odd ability...*Gegyagyagya!*"

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When Luffy reached the ship, the others were gone; very likely on their own adventure. Lucky them! Merry's figurehead had been put back on and repaired.

"Usopp and Gaara did such a good job on you, Merry." Luffy said, as he ran a finger along the railing. The deck was repaired too, so that meant they could leave very soon!

Luffy suddenly shivered as a chill went up his spine and his hair stood on end. He glanced towards a section in the jungle, searching with his mystery power. Luffy had a feeling of...being watched? Was it an animal? He tried again, focusing a bit more...but...nothing? Maybe he'd imagined it...?

Luffy shrugged, grabbed a barrel of alcohol and hummed a made-up tune as he made his way back to the others.

Once he was far enough away, a few people peeked around a tree that had helped conceal them. The odd skill that had kept them hidden from sight dropped the moment they moved.

"That was way too close..." Miss Valentine's Day sighed in relief.

"Your art skills are so useful, Miss Golden Week." Mr. 5 commented. "For a moment, I thought he was actually going to see us."

"Green and brown are excellent concealers." Miss Goldenweek replied. "People easily overlook them."

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Upon the Giant's return, Luffy happily opened the barrel for Dorry, who thanked the young lad for his consideration.

Within seconds of his drinking the alcohol, an explosion went off – shocking Luffy and Vivi.

"QUACK!" Karoo flapped his wings and ran in circles.

Smoke wafted from Dorry's mouth as he fell over.

"Dorry! Hey, Dorry! Are you okay?" Luffy asked with growing concern.

Vivi had a feeling of dread...was that? It couldn't be...no way *they* could be here! Maybe she was overthinking it.

"You..." Dorry groaned as he slowly stood up. "How dare you?!"

Luffy dodged when Dorry suddenly attacked him.

"Hey! What're you doing?!" Luffy asked.

"That was a dirty trick!"

As Luffy dodged another strike, Vivi desperately tried to call out, "We weren't trying to trick you! Please! Calm down and rest!"

When Dorry brought his sword down, Luffy twisted around the blow and delivered a fierce, piercing strike into Dorry's stomach. Dorry went down, felling several trees as he did so.

"Now, calm down!" Luffy commanded. "I'm sorry, I don't know what happened with the alcohol, but I swear on Roger, on my honor as a Captain, that it wasn't on purpose!"

Dorry slowly got up, his face covered in shadow. "Hmm...very well..." Sighing heavily, he added, "It seems the god of Elbaf has forsaken me. This was meant to happen."

"Wait, what?!" Vivi was incensed. "What is *that* supposed to mean?! This was clearly something else, *please* stop!"

She held up her arms in a rather pointless and feeble attempt to stop the Giant from believing that his gods had left him. It was far too cruel a notion.

"Your god didn't abandon you, Dorry-san!" Vivi looked as if she was about to cry. "It was sabotage!"

Just then, the volcano went off.

"Well, it's time." Dorry gathered up his weapon and stood. "The volcano's the signal for our match to start."

"Wait, you can't!" Luffy's voice was nearly begging. "If you go injured

like that, you'll lose!"

"...It was determined I'd lose. Thanks for an enjoyable last meal."

"Then fight me!" Luffy demanded. "If you lose to me, you can't lose to the other guy!"

Dorry only laughed. "This is a Giant's honor, young one! Besides, my vow to fight Brogy was made long before you were born!"

It was pointless to try and change the Giant's mind.

"But it's not fair!" Luffy insisted almost childishly.

Dorry only shook his head and continued trying to leave.

"You can't go!" Luffy insisted on arguing.

Smiling sadly, Dorry slowly lifted up a boulder, and said, "Hey, would you hold this for me?"

Luffy paused long enough to ask a very confused, "What?"

Then Dorry handed him the boulder, and Luffy fell under its weight.

"Hey! Hey! You cheated!"

Luffy squirmed wildly under the boulder but to no avail.

"It was nice talking with you..." Dorry said. "Thank you for letting me relive my memories one last time."

Luffy and Vivi watched as Dorry left.

Vivi tried pushing the boulder off of Luffy, but couldn't even make it budge an inch.

"That pisses me off!" Luffy fumed. "Someone messed with their duel! When I find out who it was, I'll kick their ass!"

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Nami, Usopp, Pudding and Gaara stared up at Brogy, who happily shared his meal with them. Sure, he may have killed the T-Rex that was about to eat Nami, but that was just a very convenient excuse.

"He's obviously trying to fatten us up!" Usopp was sure of it. Making

sure that the Giant wasn't going to hear him, Usopp hissed, "Gaara, don't eat any of it!"

"...I'm hungry." Gaara replied, and took a huge bite. "Besides, I don't think you have to worry about being eaten...the Giant probably has a better use by using your bones as toothpicks."

"Why, Gaara?!" Usopp tearfully demanded.

"Oh, that would be a terrible end to our journey..." Pudding sighed, though she didn't look particularly sad about it. She looked somewhat pleased. "Being cannibalized in a desolate forest in a desperate fight for survival of the fittest..." She sighed, whispering to herself, "To be ravaged and fought over while the men act like beasts...hee-hee..."

"Uh...what?" Usopp couldn't help but ask in confusion. "Seriously, have you been talking to Gaara?"

"I don't have to worry about being eaten; I'll just use my sand to drill my way out of his stomach." Gaara glanced at Nami. "You'll probably be his pet."

"Gee, thanks." Nami muttered. Knowing where she ranked in terms of being food or a pet made to a Giant made things so much better.

"This is fantastic, having visitors!" Brogy said happily. "It's been so long!"

"Thank you for having us." Gaara replied.

"Oh, yes!" Pudding agreed. "I must say, your cooking is fantastic! Tell me, please – what do you know about the plants here? Can any of them be sustained on a ship?"

"Well, there's plenty to know." Brogy began talking about some of the plants that he knew of for certain. There were a few plants that were actually poisonous that he could eat safely; due to his size. For a Human, it most certainly would be deadly.

"Hey, Mister," Nami decided making more conversation was the best way in delaying their inevitable demise so that they could think of an escape plan. "What is this island called? And do you know how long it takes for the Log Pose to set?"

"Hmm..." Brogy swallowed a mouthful of meat. "Well, it's called Little Garden, ironically I suppose. As for how long it takes the Log Pose to

set...about a year.”

“A year?!”

It was a good thing they had an Eternal Pose. And that Brogy had no idea about it.

“*Gababababa!* Don’t be so surprised!” Brogy said. His voice became solemn. “Sometimes, it takes a few years for a Pose to set on some islands, unfortunately, it doesn’t always work out...”

Brogy pointed to a series of graves off to the side. “Those are the people who stopped here but couldn’t survive...everything here is pretty dangerous, and Humans have a difficult time surviving on this island due to all of its dangers.”

“It’s a good thing we have an Eternal Pose, then.”

Both Usopp and Nami looked at Gaara with accusing eyes, mentally demanding why he felt the need to bring that up.

“Very true, that’s the way to be prepared! *Gababababa!*” Brogy praised.

“So, you’re from Elbaf, right?” Pudding asked, and Brogy looked somewhat surprised, but very pleased.

“You know about the Giants’ island?”

“Mm-hmm, yeah!” Pudding nodded. “What brought you all the way out here?”

“I was a Pirate, actually...then my *nakama* and I had...something...to settle...and had our crew drop the two of us here. Wasn’t right of us to keep the crew here if we had a fight going on between us and they wanted to continue their adventure.”

“Elbaf?” Usopp was looking up at Brogy with fascination now. “What is it like?”

Brogy was more than happy to talk of his home island and hometown. He missed it, of course. He spoke of the Giants and their code of honor.

Usopp’s eyes began to sparkle.

“I have a new dream! You’ve inspired me, Brogy!” Usopp shouted as

he stood up. Standing straight with confidence, “I’m gonna see Elbaf someday, and I’ll become a proud warrior of the sea!”

Brogy laughed heartily. “That’s a wonderful dream!”

“...What exactly are you fighting your friend for, anyway?” Gaara asked.

“To be perfectly honest,” Brogy laughed, “I don’t remember!”

The volcano erupted, causing both Nami and Usopp to practically jump out of their skin. Brogy gave a grunt as he stood up. “Well, I’m off. I’ll be back when the volcano erupts again!”

Holding his axe aloft, Brogy grinned. “I’ll be victorious for sure this time!”

“Good luck!” Usopp called.

Gaara put his gourd to the side and laid back. He looked at the clouds and the surrounding jungle. He was curious about the strange caverns that Brogy had sat beside; the formations looked worn, and the jungle had encroached into the caverns.

He wondered what his dream should be. Gaara liked the freedom of exploring; seeing new places and new things. His life in the desert was a thing long in the past. When he had been much younger, Gaara remembered staring out at the vast desert plains and thinking they were so big. But now, it was so small compared to everything else.

Giants – his uncle had read a book about them – they had been the thing of fairy tales. But here was a real Giant, and apparently there was an entire island of them. What would Yashamaru say if he saw Giants? Or saw Luffy stretch like he did? What about the Sea Kings?

Gaara was still staring off into space when Brogy returned.

“It was a tie!” Brogy announced jovially as he sat back down. “I’ll definitely win next time.”

The conversation between the others picked up again, but Gaara wasn’t paying attention. Dammit, he was so bored! Right now, he sort of wished he could sleep as easily as Zoro did, but he had been asleep just days before.

“I’m going exploring,” Gaara stated as he stood up and adjusted his

gourd back into place.

“We should stick together, though...right?” Usopp said hesitantly.

Gaara rolled his eyes. “I have my sand shield, and I’m not Zoro-nii. Besides, I want new materials for my sand.” In his perfectly blunt way, Gaara added, “And Brogy’s just going to fight his friend again – I already watched the Giants fight.”

“But you sat on the ground the entire time...?” Nami questioned.

Gaara then revealed his sand-eye.

Nami cringed.

“This could really be useful!” Usopp was impressed.

“Very true. You could peep in on people in their most private moments with that...” Pudding pointed out.

“Not really what I meant...” Usopp said flatly.

Gaara sent Pudding a look. “Why would I do that?”

Nami slapped Pudding’s shoulder. “Don’t give Gaara-kun weird ideas! It would be more useful to scout out guards’ locations so I can steal treasure.”

“You aren’t any better...” Usopp muttered under his breath about Nami.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding!” Pudding laughed teasingly. “As long as Gaara-sweetie is careful it should be fine. You can get back to the ship on your own, right?”

Gaara nodded.

“See? Go have fun, sweetie.”

Usopp didn’t like the idea of Gaara going off on his own. “I really think we should stick together! This is clearly a dangerous island!”

“Then go with him if you’re so worried.” Nami suggested.

Turning to the Sniper, Gaara asked, “Do you want to go with me, Usopp?”

Usopp gulped as he glanced in the jungle, and he could hear all the dangerous creatures just calling for blood. He was developing a new disease for sure! Then, Usopp glanced down at Gaara – and Usopp mentally cursed because the kid was giving him a *look*. No wonder Zoro indulged the kids.

“Fine...” Usopp sighed before he went on in his usual bravado. “I’ve explored many a jungle in my time! In fact, I discovered buried treasure!”

“Really?” Gaara was staring up at him fascinated, so Usopp continued.

The two disappeared into a sort of path in the jungle with Usopp telling an amazing tale of giant gorillas and dinosaurs fighting each other; cannibalistic tribesmen; a city made of gold that housed many secrets...

Because Gaara asked logical questions, the tale began to get even grander and wonderfully more absurd.

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Meanwhile, Ichibi was staring at the floor of his prison, muttering quietly to himself. “**Elbaf...Elbaf...**” a distant feeling...he’d always wanted to see Elbaf, but never had a reason to go.

He was sitting next to a Giant – a woman, more like a girl – she was still young, and she hesitated as she spoke, “I want to do the right thing for my Clan...I’m scared...What do I do?”

Dammit! Ichibi slammed his fists into one of the poles. He hated that he recognized the name, yet couldn’t remember or understand why. Who the hell was that girl?!

He was missing something important.

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Meanwhile, elsewhere on the island:

Mr. 3, Miss Goldenweek, Mr. 5, and Miss Valentine’s Day were all gathered to discuss their plans on how they could capture Vivi. Of course, those pesky Giants and the Straw Hats were in the way.

But Mr. 3 grinned as he presented a couple of wanted posters. “Those Giants have bounties on their heads, *100,000,000* belli each. Everyone

thought that they were dead...who'd have thought they were here? We can just kill them and collect the reward on our own. Those Pirates don't even really matter."

"So, do you have a plan?"

Mr. 3 scoffed in indignation. "*Of course*, I have a plan. All you lot have to do is listen and follow my instructions and we'll have succeeded with killing those giants and bothersome Pirates, and capturing that foolish Princess!"

Mr. 5 scowled even more than he usually did, clearly not appreciating how his superior was talking to him. Miss Valentine's Day simply rolled her eyes. It was typical for Mr. 3 to think so highly of himself and talk down to those under his command.

Miss Goldenweek ate a rice cracker and doodled in her sketchbook.

The Princess was their bargaining chip; with her, the King would most certainly bend over backwards to protect his daughter. Of course, her life wouldn't matter much once Mr. 2 was there. It would be far better having someone wear her face than have the girl herself.

With Mr. 3's instruction to injure the one Giant, and wait – they could most certainly take out the other one when he least suspected it. He already had a plan in place.

He'd already taken into account the kusarigama kid and the Swordsman. Their fight in Whiskey Peak had made them infamous.

"Now, here's what we're going to do..."

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Naruto half-hummed a tune he remembered hearing from when he was a child, "...we are fighting dreamers...hmm-hmm..."

Naruto recalled Gramps telling him about the Forest of Death when he had been younger. He wondered how that place compared to this island. There was jungle and more jungle, and he had found a few interesting things. There were a few interesting animals, and a dinosaur charged him; but was easily taken down by Hayabusa.

And with a controlled strike, too!

Naruto grinned to himself as he wiped the Blade clean. "You're really

cool, Hayabusa...”

He was totally getting the hang of this!

Naruto walked in a random direction a bit more until he came upon a rather large river that led out to the sea. The water smelled salty and musky like the surrounding jungle, so was no good for drinking...but whatever.

He started walking across when he noticed something odd...a white thing in the water further into the canal. It was mostly hidden by the surrounding foliage, and really... Naruto would have missed it if it weren't for how the sunlight hit it.

At first, he wondered if it was a water cave or something.

Curiosity got the better of him, and a water cave would be cool. Luffy and Usopp would certainly love to explore it. Was there treasure deep inside? Nami'd love that.

Except... Naruto's eyes widened when he saw that it was a ship. A sinking feeling appeared in Naruto's stomach when he saw that the figurehead for the white ship was that of a skull with wings and crossed sabers...just like...

Naruto turned on his heel and ran. He to warn the others that Baroque Works was on the island!

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Usopp followed after Gaara as they walked along the shoreline. Gaara simply rolled up his pant legs and walked in and on the water at times.

“Look at this rock, Usopp!” Gaara was excited as he held it up. “This is good for your ammo, right?”

“Yeah, it is,” Usopp agreed. “You’ve got a keen eye for this stuff.”

Gaara sent him a look, and muttered, “Thanks...” he quickly grinded the rock down and sucked the sand into his gourd.

“Hey, a crab!” Usopp pointed out the creature that was climbing a tree, which was actually bigger than his head. It was monstrous! Usopp backed away a little when the crab *hissed* at him.

Gaara found a large shell – but the creature inside didn't like being

disturbed. It squirted out some sort of nasty-smelling substance before flicking itself out of Gaara's hold.

The smell stuck to Gaara's hands no matter how hard he scrubbed them; heck, he even shed his sand armor and that didn't help.

"Here, try this," Usopp said as he cut a lemon in half with a knife. "Hold out your hands."

"What do you use the lemon for?" Gaara asked as Usopp squirted the juice into his hands.

"Very useful for squirting into an unsuspecting person's eyes!" Usopp proudly stated. "Or for getting rid of nasty, lingering smells."

Thankfully, the smell went away.

"Thanks, Usopp."

"Sure thing, you can count on me!" Usopp said proudly.

They searched along the shoreline a bit longer, and when a dinosaur made the poor decision to try and attack them, Gaara excitedly crushed it and was happily thinking about materials for Naruto and Usopp's weapons.

Usopp clung to Gaara, ignoring the younger boy's glare. "I would have died getting skewered by that thing for sure if you weren't here, Gaara!"

Gaara managed to slip away by substituting himself with a sand clone – and Usopp thought that was so amazing he promptly forgot his fright.

"I wonder if the others are almost done..." Usopp said after a while. "We should be able to go now, since Merry's fixed."

Gaara nodded in agreement, and he happened to glance up when a large bird flew overhead. Furrowing his brow, Gaara asked, "What's that smoke?"

Usopp looked as well. Where the fire was coming from wasn't anywhere near where Brogy had been. And he knew it wasn't Dorry, because Brogy had mentioned that he was on the opposite side of the island. This was more in the middle. "Maybe Pudding and Sanji are preparing something? I guess we should go see."

Zoro had found one strange creature; it was large and had three horns. Of course, after he killed it he just had to run into that stupid cook and their argument started over. The two of them dropped their kills off by Merry and were at it again.

Zoro could most certainly curse his luck when he slipped in something – and it wrapped around his ankles. Zoro almost fell on his face but someone caught him, and a hard, white substance wrapped around his wrists and hands.

A man with a face that made a person want to punch it looked at Zoro smugly as he pulled the Swordsman to his feet.

“So, you’re one of the two that took out all those Bounty Hunters at Whiskey Peak. Not as impressive as I thought.”

Being unable to use his swords or form Jutsu, Zoro used the next best thing. He head-butted the bastard and smirked when there was a satisfying crunch from the man’s nose breaking.

The man howled as he cupped his nose, blood spirting out from between his fingers.

Forming a club with his wax, Mr. 3 marched over and raised his weapon.

Zoro was about to ghost out of the wax around his hands when he just stopped for no reason. His attention was drawn to a strange, elaborate Seal that the girl had drawn. Why was he focused so much on that thing?! He could see the guy getting closer.

Zoro could do nothing as the bastard hit him across the head in fierce retaliation.

Zoro went down, seeing stars.

“Miss Goldenweek!” the man snarled. “Get him to the platform!”

“Can’t do that.” Miss Goldenweek drawled.

“Why not?!”

“Don’t wanna move.”

Mr. 3 cursed under his breath. He thankfully had a handkerchief in his

pocket; so he held that to his face while he awkwardly dragged Zoro towards the platform.

That was how he found himself – laying on top of a strange, layered platform that looked like an annoying oversized cake. And...what the hell?! A Giant was there as well, and he was a sobbing mess. Zoro admittedly had a bit of sympathy for the guy when he saw the large, pillar-sized spikes that had been essentially nailed through his hands and feet.

Zoro was a bit too dazed to stand upright, and he ended up having rings placed around his arms and just below his knees. He watched as Mr. 3 went off somewhere, while the girl simply set up a picnic nearby.

Zoro tried to think. He could probably ghost the wax off of his hands if he shifted just right. If he did that, though; he wasn't close enough to the water to do anything, his feet were trapped, and he could only do so much from this position. Thinking of all his attacks – it wouldn't do much good if he couldn't move easily.

He might end up injuring himself if he simply tried executing his attack – like breaking his ankles or something.

Nami joined him on the platform not long after, and she was placed in a standing position. "Zoro? Oh, damn-Zoro! What happened to your head?"

"Got hit. How'd you get caught?"

"A dinosaur came into the clearing where Pudding and I were, and we had to run..." Nami sighed. "We got split off from each other."

Nami then called out worriedly, "Brogy!"

Brogy simply continued sobbing, lamenting his friend and cursing Mr. 3.

Miss Valentine's Day showed up in the clearing for a moment; she bent down to talk to Miss Goldenweek, and the two left.

"What's going to happen to us?" Nami whispered.

"Maybe it's just our time," Zoro said, and that earned him a glare from Nami. "But do you really wanna go out without a fight?"

“...I guess not...”

Just then, Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine’s Day showed up, leading Vivi and Luffy to the clearing.

Luffy walked strangely zombie-like and he had an odd look on his face. He gritted out through his teeth, “Today’s a nice day for a walk...!”

Luffy took his place next to the others, and his limbs were quickly encased in the wax.

Vivi had tears streaming down her face as she was forced to sit down by Mr. 3. He sent her a look and smiled, making her skin crawl.

“Earl-Grey?” he asked, holding up a teapot. “Might as well enjoy the show.”

Vivi accepted the teacup, took one look at the steaming liquid inside and promptly threw the contents into Mr. 3’s face. Vivi squared her shoulders. But it was clear how terrified she was. “You won’t get away with this! You’re going to destroy an entire country! And for what?!” Vivi practically snarled, in a very un-princess-like way, “May the gods strike you down without mercy!”

Mr. 3 slapped Vivi, then scoffed, and slapped wax onto Vivi’s hands and feet. Why were these people so insistent on hitting him in the face?! “The gods are just something people made up to feel better about themselves,” snapping his fingers, and the top of the wax platform began to spin, raining wax down on those who were trapped. “It’s about time you woke up to reality, princess. You have lost, and no-one could possibly save you.”

Zoro was forced into a standing position, and the wax around his hands disappeared. With a glint in his eye, Zoro slashed at his ankles, shocking everyone who watched him do it.

“Aw, damn...it didn’t work...” Zoro cursed.

“What the hell, Zoro?!” Nami demanded.

“Well...my attacks are easier to do if I can move, so...” Zoro shrugged.

Nami looked down at Zoro’s bleeding legs and face-palmed.

Luffy was grunting as he yanked and pulled against Miss

Goldenweek's Seal. He just, couldn't move. He wanted to move, but his body wouldn't let him. He glared down at his hands and feet which were still encased in the wax.

More wax slowly began covering them, and Nami wondered what they were going to do...where were the others?! Their only hope was the others happening upon them! Nami took a deep breath to call out, but instead had a nasty coughing fit as she breathed in bits of wax.

Dammit! Nami tried to think. What were they going to do?

Someone burst into the clearing then, and they saw a flash of yellow and red. Naruto appeared in the clearing, and he stopped when he started taking in the scene. He recognized Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine's Day immediately.

"You guys?!"

He saw Vivi, and how she looked so scared and worried and so hopeful. Naruto knew he had to help the others, and quickly. Drawing Hayabusa, Naruto snarled as he charged forward only to suddenly stop and feebly throw his weapon at a circle on the ground.

"What?" Naruto questioned. He tried to execute a more powerful attack to get rid of the circle, but his attacks barely did anything; essentially disappearing before his attack could carry through. Naruto was basically just dropping his weapon on the ground.

"I knew there were more of you on the island," Miss Goldenweek stated lazily as she scribbled in her sketchbook, "So I made sure to prepare."

There were several circles all throughout the clearing.

"Damn you, I'll get out of this, Dattebayo!"

Naruto charged up an attack but just dropped his weapon on the ground again. What was he supposed to do?

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Gaara and Usopp ran into a panicking Karoo, who had managed to escape his captors. Karoo could only quack so much, so the two mounted the duck and he ran with all his might towards where he had seen Vivi and the others last.

Upon seeing the platform, and how everyone was trapped, Usopp thought that he might have an understanding of how it worked. If they could just – his train of thought cut off when Gaara ran into the clearing. Dammit, Usopp at least wanted to think of a strategy!

Before the Agents could do anything, though, Usopp figured all he could do for the moment was serve as a distraction. If Gaara and Naruto were there, then things would be fine, right? He wouldn't have to fight directly, and he could serve as a distraction!

Mr. 5 cursed when something hit him. A raw egg?!

Karoo charged forward with Usopp riding the duck backwards, and firing at the man. "Go Karoo!"

Karoo dodged several explosive shots, before Mr. 5 snarled in irritation and chased after them.

He strategically set up various explosives as he ran after the annoying kid, and managed to lead them back through to his traps by firing at them – Karoo and Usopp cried out as they were sent flying.

Miss Valentine's Day sauntered up, and plopped herself down on Usopp. "Mr. 5, go take care of the brat. I'll handle him."

Usopp shuddered as he looked up at the woman who had a cold smile on her face. "I wonder how much you can handle."

"Huh?"

"How much weight can you handle before you get crushed?"

Miss Valentine's Day laughed cruelly as she slowly counted up, increasing her weight bit-by-bit.

Usopp began gasping for air and his vision started going dark. Getting crushed slowly – Usopp tried struggling. He threw dirt over his shoulder. He would make his death as annoying as possible.

Miss Valentine's Day's laugh was cut off when something flew by her face. Her eyes slowly widened when she saw that her bangs had been cut. She reached up to her cheek and pulled away to see blood on her fingers.

Pudding then charged in and sent the other woman flying with a kick. When the weight suddenly left Usopp, he took in grateful gulps of air,

and looked up at Pudding.

“My, what a wonderful taste you have.” Pudding said as she tapped her foot. That actually kinda hurt... “But Usopp-sweetie is my man, and I don’t appreciate your advances.”

Pudding then crouched down next to Usopp. “Are you okay, sweetie?”

“Y-yeah...thanks.” Usopp said with a wheeze, not really registering all of what Pudding had said. He was just thankful to still be alive.

Patting his cheek and nodding, Pudding stood up and drew her knives. “Can you move? Good. Go help the others.” Smiling at the Agent, “Let’s have a bit of fun, shall we?”

Miss Valentine’s Day quickly widened the distance between them. Thinking of a strategy because Mr. 5 wasn’t around at the moment – she went somewhat weightless and began skipping between the trees, winding through them.

Pudding gave chase, her knives at the ready.

Miss Valentine’s Day ran towards a tree and sprung off of it, towards Pudding. Twisting in the air, Miss Valentine’s Day suddenly increased her weight as she crashed into Pudding.

“1500 Kilo Wrecking Ball!”

Pudding was thrown back, dazed.

Miss Valentine’s Day crashed into the trees, but simply brushed herself off. Pointing her umbrella at Pudding, she began cackling as her opponent quickly moved out of the way, just barely dodging the rain of bullets.

The Agent grinned maliciously. She had earned her spot for a reason; and knew that it was quite foolish to count solely on her partner to fight. She cackled with glee as she finally hit Pudding in the back – her blood flying and body convulsing.

But then, there was a *poof* and there was a log in the girl’s place – that had taken all the damage.

“What?” Miss Valentine’s Day questioned. *“AHH!”*

She cried out when a knife was thrown into her shoulder. The Agent spun around, making herself light before increasing her weight as she

struck Pudding. Pudding put up her arm to block and winced when it was like being hit with several hundred pounds. With a deep breath, Pudding focused, thankful that she'd had Haki to block – otherwise that hit could have fractured her arm.

Miss Valentine's Day lightened her weight and bounced along the trees and floated up above for a brief moment, then rocketed downwards with her leg extended – fully intending on skewering Pudding. Pudding dodged to the side and sliced at Miss Valentine Day's leg several times.

Pain shot threw the Agent's leg; even more so when she crashed into a tree, splintering it. She could barely put weight on it. She fired a rain of bullets at Pudding again, and floated up into the air.

Pointing her umbrella at the ground, Miss Valentine's Day began firing haphazardly as she slowly increased her weight so she wouldn't go drifting off.

Pudding dodged, and winced when her arm was hit.

"This is absolutely elating!" Pudding called out. Admittedly, she was rather annoyed. Miss Valentine's Day was good about keeping the distance up between them – and she couldn't see anything with the dust cloud.

If she couldn't see Miss Valentine's Day, then the Agent couldn't see her either, right? Pudding quickly moved through the jungle, using the dust and trees for cover. Miss Valentine's Day was firing indiscriminately, and several bullets came close to hitting Pudding more than once.

Pudding had to jump back when Miss Valentine's Day flew through the air, and the Agent smirked upon seeing her.

"1000 Kilo Pinball!"

The woman began springing off of the trees and gaining momentum. She then began firing her umbrella gun at various times, forcing Pudding on the defensive. The Agent was also stirring dust, making it difficult to see. Pudding felt the woman crash into her, and Pudding went down.

The wind was knocked out of her and her right side protested any movement. A smile went to Pudding's face.

“How *wonderful*~” Pudding stood up as she watched Miss Valentine’s Day float overhead. It was a shame that her opponent wasn’t a man.

Of course, that reaction wasn’t one the Agent was expecting. Miss Valentine’s day grimaced when her wounds felt as if they were burning. Focusing on her current problem, the Agent wondered if...

Just then, there was a roar – it sent shivers through all those who heard it. A throbbing, suffocating dread enveloped them.

“W-what...?” Pudding questioned when she heard the inhuman roar. “Gaara?”

An indescribable, suffocating weight hit them. There was a disgusting feeling in the air; filled with rage and hopelessness. Pudding wanted to run and hide from it.

Miss Valentine’s Day nearly passed out, but she had to focus. Using the distraction, she tried firing at Pudding again.

Pudding barely dodged. She had a sinking, worrying feeling. Fighting Miss Valentine’s Day was the last thing on her mind. Pudding ran towards the clearing, in spite of everything in her screaming at her to stop, run, and hide. Anything to get away from whatever that sinking feeling was.

Pudding burst out into the clearing, and froze when she saw Naruto and Gaara, what were they - she barely dodged an attack from Miss Valentine’s Day that would have crushed her. The attack caused the ground crack and crumble.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but I won’t let you!” Miss Valentine’s Day shouted. She was absolutely unwilling to fail here – because failure meant a personal visit from Miss All Sunday who would ensure that Miss Valentine’s Day would never fail again – nor would she get any second chances.

Miss Valentine’s Day floated up again, and Pudding rapidly went through a series of hand signs then pointed her left hand at Miss Valentine’s Day, splaying her fingers just like the Scroll had instructed. Electric sparks surrounded from her fingers. Pudding drew back her right hand as if loading an arrow in an invisible bow and called out, “*Inazuma no ya no Jutsu!*”

Releasing the charge, an arrow of electricity shot towards Miss Valentine’s Day – who cursed mentally – she tried dodging by

increasing her weight. The bolt of electricity hit her umbrella and the charge carried through her.

Miss Valentine's Day's body jolted, and she was sent crashing into the jungle below.

Pudding hadn't wanted to kill the other woman, and didn't think she did. She hadn't really had much of a chance to practice the technique, and knew that it wasn't as strong as it should have been.

Pudding ran towards the others, she had no idea what was going on – what was wrong with Naruto and Gaara?!

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Frustrated, Naruto uselessly dropped his kusarigama on the ground. His brother and his friends were in trouble! There was some relief knowing that Usopp was there – and Mr. 5 and Miss Valentine's Day went after him.

Except minutes later, Mr. 5 returned and with a bored expression on his face, fired an explosion at Naruto.

“That's for Whiskey Peak.”

Naruto went flying, and although the explosion did hurt and caused his ears to ring, he grinned. He was no longer focused on that damn circle! Naruto charged forward at Mr. 5, spinning Hayabusa and he released – only for the kusarigama to target another circle.

Naruto cursed when an explosion hit him point blank.

“Naruto!” Zoro yelled, and the concern in his voice was clear.

Naruto's vision was filled with spots.

Naruto was sent flying again by a fierce kick. He pulled himself up again, and stared at the circle under his palms. He wondered if he could ask Kyuubi for Chakra... The last time he had used Kyuubi's Chakra had been...back in Kiri. While he had talked plenty with Kyuubi, but he hadn't exactly trained to wield Kyuubi's Chakra. While the Fox was certainly more cooperative, the most he had offered was healing.

“Naruto!” Vivi's worried voice cried out. Naruto slowly glanced up into the barrel of a gun.

“Naruto!” Usopp called out as he readied his weapon.

Naruto looked at the others on the platform – feeling utterly helpless. *‘Kyuubi...please...help me...’*

Kyuubi could sense the full killing intent of the man with the gun, and Naruto’s pleading desperation clawed at him. What a fool that man was, thinking he could kill the Kyuubi’s host with such ease... Kyuubi would not take such an offence lightly.

Mr. 5 flinched back in shock when Naruto suddenly convulsed awkwardly, and he got down on all fours. The marks on his cheeks were more pronounced and his eyes – they turned from blue to a deep, crimson red.

“You **bastard!**” Naruto snarled with a distorted voice. He raised a hand that was covered in red Chakra and tore up the ground. *“I’m gonna kill you!!”*

Mr. 5 wisely widened the distance between him and the kid, not knowing what was going on. He fired his gun, and he saw the bullet tear through the kid’s shoulder – but that only seemed to make the kid angrier – and what the hell?! His shoulder wound healed within seconds. Only the blood from the wound remained behind showing that the kid *had* been injured. The kid charged forward on all fours – the red energy surrounding him tearing up the ground as he went.

At that moment, an enraged roar sounded somewhere else in the clearing. It made Mr. 5 wonder just what the hell they’d gotten themselves into.

Naruto leapt high into the air, and Mr. 5 fired an explosion – only for Naruto to swipe through it with ease.

A suffocating rage crushed down on Mr. 5, making him too scared to even move. He watched as Naruto raised his claws to strike and his instinctive desire to live broke through the trance as he impulsively held up his arm to block. He was going to explode as soon as the kid made contact.

Mr. 5 screamed when his arm was severed from the rest of him, the explosion not doing a thing. Naruto twisted through the air and tore through Mr. 5’s abdomen, and he was sent flying back several feet from the force. Pain rippled through the agent’s body, and he gasped for air. He couldn’t move or even react as Naruto brought down another strike, tearing his throat out. Naruto struck again and again,

unnecessarily, cursing this man who dared to try and take away his family. He was bloodying up the dirt at this point.

Naruto stopped for just a moment as his mind began focusing on the next task; gasping and wheezing as he slowly looked across the battlefield. *That girl...that little bitch! It was because of her...*

The one who had scribbled down all those stupid Seals! He was going to rip her in half! Naruto charged forward, intent on reaching his target.

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When Gaara arrived with Usopp, his first thought was about his brothers and the others. Were they okay?! Gaara ran into the center of the clearing, and he could smell blood. He froze when he saw blood around Zoro's feet and – Nami and Luffy were there. Luffy was struggling, fighting against some sort of invisible bond, and Nami was frozen, looking terrified.

Slowly, Gaara turned towards Brogy, who had spikes through his hands, and a man – he had Vivi sitting next to him. Vivi was crying, and her lip was bloody.

He then noticed that Naruto was involved with his own fight. He turned and saw a girl who sat casually as if he wasn't even there. She drank tea and ate rice crackers.

Something stirred in Gaara's stomach. A familiar rage. He clenched his fists. These people were trying to take away his family! He was so furious, his rage at this absolute injustice began to grow. Gaara grabbed his head as he fell to his knees. He began to drool as his teeth started growing into more pronounced fangs.

This was absolutely unforgivable in Ichibi's opinion! Yeah, these people got on his nerves to no end, but Zoro was the one who had treated Gaara and by extension Ichibi, as if he were more than just a weapon.

That idiot, always doing stupid stuff like his so-called training, always stepping up for the brats, always indulging them – in Ichibi's opinion, one that he would never voice out loud, Zoro was *his*. He had always been selfish, that way.

“Sand-brat!”

“Oh, are you here to rescue your friends?” Mr. 3 asked as he approached, and really, he was amused at the redheaded kid for failing before he could even try. Mr. 3 failed to recognize the danger he was in because this was just a child – and he had his Devil Fruit. He had earned his position for a good reason.

He fired some wax at Gaara, and sand rose up and blocked the attack, causing Mr. 3 to wonder at the shield. Gaara was shaking and he glared at the man – Mr. 3 flinched. One eye had turned completely black and yellow, and sand was wrapping around the kid’s face – and some sort of ear or horn had appeared on one side of his head. Then, the other eye changed color as well as more sand rapidly enveloped the kid.

“GIVE ME BACK MY FAMILY!!” Gaara roared as sand rose up around him and formed into a tail. More sand wrapped around his limbs forming a makeshift body of sorts.

The kid was a strange mix between being Human and some other creature. The form he took looked somewhat familiar, but Mr. 3 couldn’t place it.

Finally recognizing the threat for what it was, Mr. 3 hastily formed an armor around himself. The Candle Champion was not easily defeated! “You can’t possible get passed my defense, my wax is stronger than steel!”

Gaara reached out, and his sand shot forward and wrapped around Mr. 3. Tendrils of sand that glowed with a red energy slowly began crawling up the armor. Mr. 3 couldn’t move, no matter how hard he tried. The sand got into his joints, and he flinched when sand moved passed his eyes and he could feel the grains tickling his cheek.

“Wait! I can help you!” Mr. 3 began begging for his life. Bargaining was all he had. “I can tell you everything I know about Mr. 0!”

Wordlessly, Gaara raised his hand and glared. This bastard tried to take his family and had the nerve to think that he would be spared if he begged. Mr. 3’s pleading cries were muffled by the sand, and he stopped when Gaara clenched his fist. The popping of his head was truly satisfying. His sand pulsed a glowing red as it began crushing and grinding the wax armor down until nothing was left.

“Sand-brat!” Zoro called out in desperation. He was hoarse at this point. “Gaara!”

Zoro cursed again when he saw Naruto tearing up Mr. 5's corpse.

Luffy was staring wide-eyed, and Nami felt sick to her stomach.

Somewhere on the island, two different fruits shifted in appearance as they acquired swirled patterns.

Gaara roared as he charged up the platform and knocked the candles to the side entirely by accident – and the flames licked the hostages.

“Gaara!” Zoro called out, and honestly, he had both Luffy and Nami concerned. Zoro turned to Naruto as well, who was now charging at Miss Goldenweek. He could move somewhat, so he began yanking at his legs while yelling, “Naruto!”

Gaara suddenly snarled and took off – right towards Pudding who halted upon seeing him. But Gaara shot passed her – Pudding yelped as he went by, and rebounded off of several trees before stopping. He sniffed at the air before bounding off again – right towards Miss Valentine's Day who stumbled out of the jungle looking dazed.

The woman froze upon seeing Gaara. She could feel the suffocating bloodlust, and she *knew* right then, she was going to die. Forcing herself to move, Miss Valentine's Day raised her umbrella and began firing as she floated up into the air to get away.

Zoro began frantically pulling against the wax and hacking at it with his sword trying to get out.

The heat was intense, and Nami yelped when the fire began licking at her clothes. With no other option, she ripped off her burning shirt before it could become fused with her skin.

“Luffy!” she yelled, “take off your shirt!”

Luffy stood there shakily. “It's so hot...so hot... AH!”

Luffy cried out when the fire began burning his clothes, finally breaking the Seal. Luffy was quick to pull off his shirt as well.

Zoro was finally able to escape as well, and he was yelling, “Naruto! Gaara! *STOP!*”

For someone who had always scowled to suddenly look so scared... Nami wondered what was wrong – and why – why were Gaara and Naruto acting like this? Seeing Naruto kill that man so easily and to

continue ripping at his corpse... Nami felt intense and disgusting fear. It almost made her want to throw up, or even tear at herself until she was bloody to wake up from this nightmare.

The boys weren't like the ones she knew...they were like...like *monsters*, a small voice in the back of her head whispered.

Luffy shivered. He could feel Zoro's fear and especially his worry. He felt both Naruto and Gaara's suffocating rage – along with that of the mystery people. Except it felt weird. Off in a way that he knew it somehow wasn't right; but didn't know enough to say what was wrong with it.

Miss Valentine's Day unfortunately, failed to escape. Sandy tendrils reached out and wrapped around the woman's arms and legs and slowly began winding up her limbs.

"Stop! Let me go!" Miss Valentine's Day screamed as she struggled to run away. The sand cut into her the more she struggled.

"Gaara?" Pudding's voice was shaky. This was like – like Mama. Different, but it frightened her that the boys could get like *this*.

Zoro honestly looked lost at that point, as if he wasn't sure what to do.

At the same time, Naruto had closed in on Miss Goldenweek, who suddenly disappeared out of sight the moment Naruto reached her.

That was it – giving Zoro the precious few seconds he needed to stop them. Zoro ghosted over and grabbed Gaara just before his sand enveloped Miss Valentine's Day entirely. He ghosted with Gaara again, but didn't apply an even layer of Chakra that caused Gaara to become confused and he lost his concentration on the sand. The sand released Miss Valentine's Day and retracted, going back to Gaara.

Zoro went into a nasty coughing fit and spit up blood, but he refused to slow down.

Over with Naruto, he stopped when the girl disappeared. He could still smell her though, and he swiped at the air right around where he had last seen her – and the girl reappeared as she had no choice but to dodge. She rapidly drew another Seal on the ground, and that only held Naruto's attention for so long before he tore through it and charged after her.

"YOU ***BITCH!***" Naruto snarled.

Miss Goldenweek had never been one to be active; only moving when she really had to. Her excessive natural clumsiness was easier to deal with by simply not moving that much. But that would be her downfall, she realized with grim fear. She was terrified, and didn't want to die. Seeing Mr. 5 and Mr. 3, what happened to them – it made her nauseated and terrified beyond words.

Miss Goldenweek tripped on a root and fell, scratching up her hands and arms. She rapidly turned to see where Naruto was, it seemed that her tripping had thrown Naruto's aim off from decapitating her - and she screamed in immense pain as the tips of a Chakra claw cut her cheek, neck, and tore through her shoulder.

It was like hot daggers and thousands of beestings hit her, and wouldn't let up.

Naruto went to deliver the finishing blow, but Zoro grabbed him and ghosted him back away from the girl; going back to the center of the clearing.

"Naruto, stop...it's okay..." Zoro said. He glared at the girl who had tears running down her face. She was shaking and sobbing, undoubtedly beyond terrified. "Get out of here."

When Miss Goldenweek didn't move right way, Zoro shouted, "LEAVE ALREADY!"

Miss Valentine's Day limped over to Miss Goldenweek and pulled her up. "Get up! *Now!* Let's go, hurry up!"

The two of them ran as best they could. Miss Goldenweek ended up being a support for the older woman since she could barely put any weight on her injured foot. The pair of them disappeared into the jungle, not looking back.

Zoro gripped both boys tightly. "It's alright, we're fine, we're all fine..."

Naruto slowly turned as his eyes became their usual blue. "Zoro-nii... you're..." Naruto gripped Zoro tightly, as if his older brother would disappear if he let go.

The sand around Gaara dropped and Gaara was holding onto Zoro as well. His voice was barely a whisper. "I thought that I was going to lose my family..."

“Sweeties...what was that?” Pudding asked, her expression one of concern. But there was a look of hesitation and fear as well.

“Oi...” Sanji had seen only the last few minutes of the action and was confused as hell.

Those two kids hadn’t exactly looked like kids anymore. The things of nightmares, mostly. Seeing Naruto chase after that girl and seriously try and *kill* her... And Gaara – acting so vicious and animalistic...the sense he had gotten from them was almost maddening.

“Seriously. What the hell...”

“We...” Zoro started, and he glanced up at the others. They looked concerned, yes, but they also looked scared. “We should get back.”

Zoro walked quickly, ignoring the others. Unwittingly, he ghosted back to the ship. He had to think. He needed to do what was best for his brothers, and for now, that was getting them away from the crew. Dammit, should he have told them – told them about the Biju and – he thought of how the boys were essentially ostracized.

The crew – they – they wouldn’t do that. They wouldn’t.

Would they?

What was he going to do?

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Dorry thankfully, had minor enough injuries that he could help treat Brogy’s wounds. Of course, his insides were still tender, but he was a Giant and this was nothing!

Brogy was especially tearful, and said thought his blubbers, “My win didn’t count! It was empty! We have to start again!”

“Of course!” Dorry agreed solemnly.

“You two should still at least relax a bit,” Vivi said, but she could only sigh in defeat as the Giants laughed half-heartedly at her suggestion.

Sanji was quick to offer Nami his suit jacket, and Nami was grateful. Nami wheezed a bit and Luffy kept coughing as well. Luffy ended up coughing up a white, lumpy substance.

Even Brogy was hacking up a storm.

“Looks like that shitty wax is still in your systems...” Sanji sighed.
“Nami-swan, take all the rest you need, I’ll pamper you.”

Nami just smiled appreciatively. For once, Pudding wasn’t responding to how Sanji was treating Nami. Glancing over at the other Chef, she had a faraway look in her eyes as she rubbed one of her arms in that absentminded way.

The Giants followed after them on their way to the ship. The two were talking somewhat cheerfully, and it made Vivi smile that they truly were friends. If only their disagreement could be settled...

Nami flinched as she slapped at something on her stomach. Gross... bug guts... That thing also bit her! She didn’t bother to even say anything, since it was just a bug bite. She’d been bitten and stung plenty of times; as unpleasant as it was, it wasn’t that big a deal. She was glad she’d thought of bringing anti-itch cream for bug-bites.

Sanji glanced back at her curiously, but Nami waved him off.

When they arrived back at the ship, they found that the dinosaurs had already been cut up – and Sanji cursed, “That cheating bastard...we didn’t properly measure our kills!”

The Giants looked on thoughtfully. Huh...that seemed kinda familiar somehow...? Anyway, the why of their fight didn’t really seem to matter anymore; just as long as one of them won.

“Hey, about those two kids...” Brogy spoke up just then, “Are they descendants of Gothi?”

“Huh?” The Pirates tilted their heads questioningly. “Who?”

“Gothi is more of a title, not a name,” Dorry explained. “The descendants of Gothi were said to have powers given to them directly by the gods. *Gegyagyagya!* The Legend of Gothi was one of my favorite stories growing up!”

“Yes, yes, mine too!” Brogy agreed.

Usopp and Luffy wanted nothing more than to listen to those stories, but there were more pressing matters.

The brothers weren’t on deck, and Luffy searched for them – he felt their presence in the cabin, and it felt – scared, worried, and Zoro’s protective nature was out in force.

The crew had to set out without the help of the brothers, who had decided that hiding was better than answering questions.

Seeing the giant fish was cool, but it wasn't the same – not with the shadows looming over them of what had happened on the island.

Vivi stared at the cabin door. She had her own questions – something was nagging at the back of her mind, and she hoped that the Roronoa Brothers would be willing to answer.

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“Are we gonna havfta leave?” Naruto asked quietly.

“If we have to.” Zoro replied. He coughed again, and made a face at the specks of blood in the wax. “We’ll manage, we’ve done it before. There’s plenty of money – we have a right to it, and...we can just split off from them after reaching Alabasta.”

“I don’t want to go...” Gaara whispered. “I like serving under Captain.”

They weren’t sure how long they were there, but there was a knock on the door and Usopp stuck his head in. “Hey, guys...? Uh, Luffy wants to see you on deck.”

Slowly, the three of them walked out on deck. The entire crew was there, of course they would be. Zoro stared out at them almost defiantly. When he sat down, both of his brothers instinctively sat behind him, and Zoro had his hand on Wado. He looked ready to fight, very much like a cornered animal.

“What the hell happened back there?” was Nami’s question.

“It’s...” Zoro began, uneasily. “It’s complicated...”

“Well, *un*-complicate it.” Nami replied.

“Those two,” she indicated the boys who ducked even more behind Zoro, “turned into – into I don’t know what, but they killed those people-“

“You were almost killed by *those* people, remember?” Pudding spoke up, her voice uncharacteristically serious. She wasn’t looking at any of them. “You were able to escape because of them, so...”

“We still deserve answers!” Nami shot back.

Vivi's back was straight and she looked regal in spite of her messy hair, dirt and accompanying bruises.

"Nami, I think you need to sit down and give them a chance to explain themselves, and not demand in such a harsh way." Vivi was looking at the Brothers with an odd expression on her face. "Please, can you tell us what that was?"

"The brats have something called 'Biju' Sealed into them," Zoro replied. Stealing a glance at his brothers, and he briefly considered whether or not Ichibi and Kyuubi would appreciate just being thrown out like that. "They both have one and they can learn control soon, they're really amazing like that. They just...panicked."

Because saying that meant there was less of a chance of them being enemies in the future. At least, that was his hope.

"I just..." Naruto began slowly, "I tried using Hayabusa and my Jutsu, but those weird, black Seals wouldn't let me...I saw Zoro-nii, Luffy, Nami – and I knew they were going to die, and that dumbass kept throwing his exploding boogers at me and – I got desperate, 'ttebayou..."

Gaara scowled quite impressively, and he gripped his scarf tightly in his hands. "I'll kill anyone who tries to take my family from me."

"Hey...so...who exactly Sealed these er...Biju into you?" Usopp was the one to ask. "Why?"

"My dad," Naruto replied. "He didn't have much of a choice, he and my mom had to sacrifice themselves to do it..."

"My...the Kazekage did – the leader of my home village." Gaara replied.

"Oh..." Pudding looked rather skeptical. "Biju? Like the bedtime stories?"

"Bedtime stories?" Naruto repeated.

Pudding narrowed her eyes somewhat. "Children's tales – either it's a happy story about some sort of Tailed Beast that frolics with children in a far off magical land, or monsters that eat naughty children because they didn't adhere their parents' warnings."

"But...we really *do* have Biju, 'ttebayou..." Naruto insisted.

“If that’s the case,” Sanji looked equally as skeptical, “How’d you even end up *here*, of all places?”

“I had to leave my village because there were guys who wanted to use me...” Naruto wasn’t looking at the crew. “They wanted...to use me to kill a lot of people...but Dog-chan asked Zoro-nii to take me...”

Naruto was picking at a string on his pant leg. “Nobody really wanted me until Zoro-nii...I had Gramps, Iruka-sensei, and Dog-chan, but...none of ‘em could adopt me, ‘ttebayou...”

Gaara was mostly quiet as he said, “I didn’t turn out right, like my...like I was supposed to. The Kazekage ordered my uncle to kill me, but Yashamaru sacrificed himself so I could leave with Zoro-nii and Naruto...”

“They’re treated like weapons,” Zoro glared at the deck. “The brats are just kids, and people didn’t always see ‘em like that. There’s a guy who was more than willing to slaughter an entire Clan because having the brat in the village is a power-balance. At the same time, the Head of that Clan wanted to use Naruto in his attack on the village.”

Zoro wasn’t looking at the others. This had been a far too dangerous venture. What if his brothers lost control again – and next time, it was one of the crew who got killed? What if...

“Anyway. Listen Luffy, let’s not waste time.” Zoro said, figuring he’d get this over with. “We’ll leave when we get to Alabasta, but –“

“What the hell?!” Luffy shouted, cutting Zoro off. “*Leave*? You’re *leaving*? Hell no! You can’t just decide that! Don’t be selfish! *I’m* the Captain, I’m the only one who gets to decide who leaves and joins the crew and *all* of you are staying!”

The Brothers could only look dumbly at Luffy and share a collective, “What?”

Luffy went into a hacking cough before he could answer.

“Zoro, you’re my Swordsman, Naruto is my Ninja, and Gaara has that awesome mystery sand! You’re my *nakama*!” Luffy glowered at them, as if daring them to disagree with him. “So this is the last time you talk about leaving, got it!”

“But what about...us?” Gaara asked. He didn’t really know how to continue with his question “We...our Biju...”

Luffy waved his hand dismissively. “I already knew about the mystery people.”

That got the Brother’s attention. He had *known* and hadn’t said anything?!

“I could sense them with my mystery power when we first met...” Luffy said casually, “And I wanted to ask you guys about them so bad, but I figured I’d let you guys tell me on your own...besides,” Luffy’s grin widened; it was friendly, welcoming, and warm, “They’re basically our *nakama* too, right?” Luffy sighed happily, “I have mystery people on my crew! Shanks *totally* doesn’t have mystery people on *his* crew!

“This is the best!” He looked at the rest of his *nakama*. “No-one’s got a problem with them staying, right?”

The way Luffy said it very much suggested that *he* would have a problem if someone else did.

“That was so terrifying...I was so scared, I didn’t even recognize you guys...” Nami admitted, but she smiled warmly. “But you guys have stuck by my side, even when you had no reason to. Like Luffy said: we’re *nakama*, right?”

She coughed a bit, but was fine.

“Gaara makes maintaining Merry so easy, you know.” Usopp spoke up, “And do you realize how much extra work there is for us without you guys there? I mean, I’m pretty incredible on my own, but...it wouldn’t be the same...so...yeah...”

“It would be pretty damn inconvenient if you shitty brothers left, shitty Biju or whatever you wanna call ‘em.” Sanji said. He glared as he pointed his cigarette at Zoro. “And do not think for once, you shitty, Neanderthalic-moss-brain, that cutting up those dinos means you’ve won. You’ve won *shit*! I mean it, my catch was bigger than yours!”

“Oh, you two aren’t *that* scary,” Pudding said quite knowingly. In her mind, there was something that had separated them from Mama. She pointedly looked at the boys as she said, “You didn’t attack *us*. Besides, you boys are my family, and you can’t leave without a really valid reason. You don’t have to explain your powers...but taking inspiration from the Biju is admittedly...odd? Whatever, it doesn’t matter, sweeties.”

Luffy could sense the utter relief that washed over Zoro. In fact, he even smiled a little.

His decision to follow after Luffy... Well, forced into it – but Zoro decided right then and there – he would do whatever it took to help Luffy reach his goal.

Naruto and Gaara were a sobbing mess, though.

Naruto thought of all the times that people had glared at him; whispered about him when they thought he wasn't listening; when people ostracized him and he had no idea why. Then this crew – they had seen what Kyuubi was capable of, and still...they still wanted him!

Gaara hadn't cried like this since he had first met Zoro and Naruto; and Zoro had made that promise to him. No-one feared him – even after what he had done to that wax guy. The looks of fear from the villagers – that one girl he had tried to give the medicine to when he had accidentally injured her – the girl who had shoved him and called him a monster – these people didn't view him like that.

Luffy and the crew was here – and they weren't scared. In fact, they were demanding they stay.

“Hey...Zoro...your ankles are bleeding...” Luffy pointed out.

Oh.

“I uh, forgot...” Zoro had to admit.

“How can you forget something like that?” Usopp legitimately wondered.

“I'll get the medical kit,” Pudding volunteered.

“You idiot,” Nami gave Zoro a light slap on his head, and he scowled. “Cutting off your feet? Seriously, what the hell?”

“...It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

“You're an insane idiot.”

Zoro rolled up his pant legs when Pudding came back, and both women worked on his ankles at the same time. He didn't want any numbing, which made Nami mutter about “stupid men and their toughness”.

Pudding grinned at Zoro. “Perhaps there are other injuries we could take care of for you?”

“No.”

“Shame...”

Zoro rolled his eyes.

Sanji had to grumble under his breath about Zoro, who didn’t seem to fully appreciate having two beautiful women tending to him.

Both Naruto and Gaara had finally calmed down, and were feeling exhausted.

“Oh! How were Dorry and Brogy, by the way?” Gaara asked. He did feel a bit guilty that they left like they did without proper goodbyes.

“Oh, they’re fine,” Nami rolled her eyes in mild exasperation. “They’re continuing their fight because well, of interference. Brogy did have a cough, though, but he says he’s fine.”

“They actually asked if you two were descendants of Gothi – it’s like a title or something,” Usopp said.

Both boys shook their heads, not having heard the term before.

“So, how exactly did you guys meet and end up in East Blue?” Usopp asked.

That simple question of course led into telling the crew about the Elemental Nations and them being locked behind a barrier (which was absolutely fascinating to Usopp and Luffy both, and Nami was curious about the island). There was talk of his Clan; the Kage; of Zabuza, Haku, and Kimimaro.

Vivi was quiet as she listened to their stories. Finally, she stood up and walked over.

“Um, excuse me...” Vivi sat down on her knees before the Brothers. She had finally mustered up the courage to ask.

“You said ‘Biju’, correct? That both of you – had Biju...” Vivi pointed at Gaara, “You have all that sand, so you must be Ichibi, right?”

The Brothers all shared an equal look of surprise. Even the rest of the crew shared the look of surprise, but they also had looks of confusion.

“How’d you know?” Gaara asked.

Vivi didn’t answer, and instead looked ready to cry. “And please, forgive me my ignorance, but...I don’t know who you are...” she looked at Naruto expectantly, but also was evidently nervous, as if she were afraid of offending him.

“Uh...Kyuubi.”

Vivi started crying, clasping her hands as her entire body shook. “I *never* considered you would take on Human forms! You...you’re *here*, you actually *exist*!” Vivi was elated, “My prayers weren’t empty after all! My meeting you was the greatest of fortunes! With *two* Biju, Alabasta will more than certainly be saved! My people will be spared!”

She didn’t notice the utterly baffled looks being sent her way. There were some thoughts of Zabuza who was desperate to save Kiri, except *this* was...it was something else.

To their shock, Vivi bowed until her forehead was pressed against the deck.

“Ichibi-sama, Kyuubi-sama! I, Nefertari Vivi, beg of you, as the Princess of Alabasta, daughter of King Cobra and the late Queen Titi, please find it within yourselves to save my country!”

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Elsewhere, on a ship made of wax that was floating without any real direction through the ocean, Miss Valentine’s Day was freaking out.

“That was *insane*! I am *not* going up against them again! You saw what they did to our partners! I am not going to return to the base and be the bearer of bad news! No! No way in hell!” Miss Valentine’s Day messed with her hair a bit, but no matter what she did it was still frizzy and refused to be tamed. Her stress certainly wasn’t helping.

“...Maybe if we explained?” Miss Goldenweek had cool cloths wrapped against her injuries which were still burning terribly, but not as intensely.

“Are you crazy?! We failed and our partners are dead! If you wanna go back and beg Miss All Sunday for mercy, go right ahead but leave me out of it!”

The girl only nodded silently. Baroque Works wasn't that forgiving of failure. The only way people ever left was through being killed; either out in the field or because of their failures.

"Look, I knew I'd be heading into danger when I was first recruited, and I'm not so naïve to think that everything'd be easy, but," the woman threw her hands out to make a point, "I'm not risking my life – not for this, not for the promise of some legend that might not even exist! There's not enough money even Gold Roger himself could offer that I'd accept!"

Shivering, she added, "And those *monsters!* To think that the Princess has people like *that* on her side...!" the woman pointed at the girl, "And *no*, we are not going back to warn the others! They'll just thank us then kill us for our trouble!"

"So...what are we going to do?" Miss Goldenweek asked.

"As far as anyone's concerned, we died on that island." Miss Valentine's Day responded. "We need to get a new ship – or – use your art skills and paint this one brown. We'll start our lives over on some island..." nodding, "Yeah, we'll be like, sisters, or something..."

Miss Valentine's Day finally calmed down as she laid back. Being able to focus on anything else was a blessing. "I've always wanted to be a chocolatier...I wanted to open my own shop after all this...I'll do that, and you can continue with your art, like, sell it out of my shop... people do that nowadays."

"...Okay. That sounds nice." Miss Goldenweek nodded. After seeing that blond kid like that; snarling with wild hair, fangs, and blood-red eyes, she didn't want to go up against him again. She couldn't close her eyes without seeing that monster coming at her, with the intent to rip her apart. Her fellow Agent had a very good point.

"Our names...Marianne, that's my name."

Miss Valentine's Day smiled warmly.

"I'm Mikita." Pausing thoughtfully she said, "We need new names, just in case...we have to be careful."

Marianne agreed, because Miss All Sunday was infamous among the upper Agents for very good and horrifying reasons.

"Yuzu." Mikita nodded. "I'll be Yuzu...and you...how about..."

Momoiro? Or just Momo? It'd make sense, if we're going to be sisters."

"I can be Momo."

With that decided, it was time to start over, and leave Baroque Works, the Straw Hats and the Princess behind.

The girls found a lovely town on some island with enough residents, soldiers, and even a small Marine Base that was only a few miles away; and the residents enjoyed the chocolate and the art the sisters produced. It wasn't long of course, before they were seeing numerous articles about Straw Hat Luffy and his insane crew. Both of them were completely shocked to see that Miss All Sunday had joined the Pirates.

The Marines complained about them enough; and a select few were even impressed, though this was said in whispers.

It was certainly a good thing that Yuzu and Momo left when they did, or as Yuzu reminded Momo of the fact. Momo most certainly agreed.

Chapter End Notes

Stalk me on Tumblr if you so desire: [adorkablemamebean](#)

Merry Christmas, ya lovelies! if you don't celebrate Christmas, I hope you have a merry day.

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Pudding's attack: Thunder Bolt Arrow

Gothi or goði (plural goðar, fem. gyðja; Old Norse: guði) was a position of political and social prominence in the Icelandic Commonwealth. The term originally had a religious significance, referring to a pagan leader responsible for a religious structure and communal feasts, but the title is primarily known as a secular political title from medieval Iceland.

The word derives from goð, meaning "god". It possibly appears in Ulfilas' Gothic language translation of the Bible as gudja for "priest", although the corresponding form of this in Icelandic would have been an unattested *gyði.

(Thank you Wikipedia)

An Author's Rambles:

There's a part of me that wants to nitpick at this chapter more, but I wanted to get it published...I may add in a bit more...idk

“Weather Spots” are going to be something that’ll pop up occasionally instead of only being mentioned once or twice and then used for a bit of comedic panic only for the unique weather phenomenon to not happen again.

Even with Nami’s skill/Gaara’s shield, they still had a problem, unintended as it was. Freak accidents happen. Even with their skills, Merry still ended up being slightly damaged.

There will be future Weather Spots, but they’ve learned and will be more prepared in the future.

These were moments that I had in mind practically from the beginning when I started planning this fic. The way Luffy simply accepts the Biju as being nakama will ever so slowly break through their hardened, people-hating hearts.

Vivi begging for their help, a person who views the Biju as beings that bring hope; and not being monsters or weapons of war is also something that resonates with the Biju and their hosts.

Another thing is that these people breathed in wax flakes, and they were fine just seconds later in canon. Well, wax-lungs will hang around for a bit, good thing they’re going to need a doctor anyway soon.

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The Biju: *does something terrifying*

The Elemental Nations: *terrified screaming*

The Pirates: Oh hey, new nakama. Let’s celebrate our newfound friendship by partying.

Vivi: *basically worships them*

The Weather Outside is Frightful, but the cold Jinchuuriki is scarier

Chapter Summary

Never Monologue and Threaten a Person while the Weather Outside is freezing

Chapter Notes

Thank you for your patience <3

Stuff gets kinda dark in this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Previously:

"I was thinking last night... Those Beasts of yours are like swords. Currently, they're sheathed, and won't listen to anyone; not even the only ones who can wield them. They've gotta be given respect, while you must earn their respect in return."

"What?" Gaara cocked his head, remembering Zoro had said something like that before. Still not really understanding, he asked, "My monster is like a sword? How so?"

"Yep, you pretty much have to prove you have the right to wield them. There are some swords that have to be tamed, but since your Beasts are alive, your approach to them must be different."

"Different how?" Gaara asked.

"By finding a unique balance between you, whatever it is." Zoro shrugged. He held up Wado Ichimonji. "This sword belonged to someone else before it was given to me...I asked for it. But I proved to this blade I had the right and the conviction to wield it."

"You talk about the sword as if it's alive." Gaara said in interest.

"Alive, but not in the traditional sense."

"You actually think the Fox and the Tanuki have names?" an incredulous Naruto questioned.

"Why wouldn't they?" Zoro answered as if it were the most obvious thing.

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"You aren't a monster, Tanuki-san." The man looked up at him from his spot. His face was blurry, and he held a black-sheathed sword casually over his shoulder. Ichibi couldn't see his face, but somehow knew the man was smiling at him, in a gentle sort of way. His tone of voice was thoughtful; even...sad, somehow. "I think... applying 'monster' to you is a loose term. I mean, even **Humans** can be monsters. You've seen what Humans are capable of, yet they dare to call you and your siblings, monsters. Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

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"Ichibi-sama, Kyuubi-sama! I, Nefertari Vivi, beg of you, as the Princess of Alabasta, daughter of King Cobra and the late Queen Titi, please find it within yourselves to save my country!"

"Uh...what?" Naruto said eloquently.

"I know we're paying you, but I would *never* dream of bribing the Biju to win a war!" Vivi was looking at them with pleading eyes. "I simply don't want my people to die so needlessly...so please...have mercy... I know you can save them!" Vivi smiled hopefully as tears ran down her cheeks. "When we go back to Alabasta, you – *both* of you can just make sure no-one fights – no-one has to die, then!"

The Pirates shared confused glances between themselves.

Gaara raised his hand as if he were asking permission to speak.

"Yes, Ichibi-sama?" Vivi paused, "Or, do you prefer Gaara-sama?"

"Um..." Gaara blinked then said, "I'm just Gaara, not Ichibi, Ichibi is different."

"Vivi, the brats *aren't* the Biju themselves," Zoro said, wondering if Vivi had misunderstood the explanation. The people back in the Elemental Nations seemed to think along the same lines. "The Biju were Sealed *into* them; they didn't *become* the Biju..."

"Sealed into...?'...But why?" Vivi asked. "Is it something along the lines of being chosen worthy to bear the Biju's power?" Vivi looked increasingly perplexed. "Did...did something happen to the Biju? Did the Biju wish to better understand Humanity?"

“It was kinda forced on us to be honest,” Naruto replied. “Kyuubi’s pretty annoyed at being locked up.” Naruto looked down sadly. “My mom had Kyuubi before me, and some stuff happened and Kyuubi would have escaped but he couldn’t, and people were dying...my parents sacrificed themselves to Seal Kyuubi into me...”

They had done the right thing, hadn’t they? Anyone in the Elemental Nations would have agreed that they did. Except, Kyuubi and Ichibi were their own people, and weren’t mere beasts like everyone else had always assumed. Vivi viewed the Bijū as something that could save her people without war... when that was the purpose of Jinchūriki – to fight and kill, and be a balance of powers between the Nations.

But the Bijū *weren’t* merely weapons, and despised being called such.

“...Everyone was scared of me, because my own Seal isn’t exactly the best...it wasn’t done right. People thought that I was a monster... Ichibi and me didn’t start off the best.” Gaara fidgeted with his scarf. “I couldn’t control my sand very well back then, and...a lot of people got hurt...so that’s why...the Kazekage wanted me gone.”

“If I ever meet that Kazekage guy, I’m gonna kick his ass!” Luffy huffed and coughed, because at least there was someone he could take his frustration out on for making his *nakama* so upset. No-one heard him as they were paying attention to Vivi’s conversation with the brothers.

“How could...” Vivi looked horrified. “To forcibly lock up the Bijū and – is that why you-I’m sorry, the Bijū disappeared? How is that possible?! Humans could *never* defeat a Bijū! Why would they do such a thing?! *How could they?!?*”

To even *dare* to hoard the Bijū to themselves when the world – and her beloved people were *suffering* – Vivi was furious.

“To be forced into becoming prisoners...and force *children* to bear such a heavy burden...” Vivi clenched her fists. “To force such a thing on you and resent you for it...the very nerve! How terribly cruel...” Vivi looked at the boys, and said, “If Ichibi-sama and Kyuubi-sama can hear me, I’m so sorry...”

“Hold up,” Nami said. “Why do you think the...Bijū...why do you think that *they* can stop the war in Alabasta?”

“Because that was how Alabasta was founded, and they have stopped countless wars in the past, as well.” Vivi replied as if it were the most

obvious thing. “It was Ichibi-sama who founded the country.”

“Wow, you’re *old*, Gaara...”

“That wasn’t me, Captain.”

“The Bijū are just stories...right?” Pudding asked, looking entirely skeptical.

“How can you refer to such great beings as merely being *stories*?” Vivi was quite incensed.

“Oh, oh! How did the Mystery People save Alabasta?” Luffy was raising his hand and asking the most important (in his opinion) question. Quite unwittingly, Luffy managed to cut Vivi off from diplomatically telling Pudding how wrong and disrespectful she was for calling the Bijū “stories”.

As if she were giving a speech in front of a large crowd and not to a small group of Pirates, Vivi gladly replied,

“The shortened version of the story is that before Alabasta was united as a country, it was made up of several smaller villages. Two powerful clans from the largest and strongest villages were constantly at war with each other for years, and their feuds bled into the rest of the smaller villages.

“Both Clan Heads had amazing propositions for those who would join them; and when they were victorious, riches would be bestowed upon them. Siblings began to slay each other; father against son; mother against daughter; families were divided, and the once-golden sands were stained red. The fresh spring waters turned into blood.

“But then a great famine came, and the fighting *still* didn’t stop – even though the people were suffering and starving. They refused to stop.

“When the people who were tired of war begged and pleaded to the gods for help, it was Ichibi-sama who answered their prayers. He ordered the fighting to stop, and the people had to come to an arrangement that benefitted everyone equally. One that ensured people would have food, medicine, and long-lasting livelihoods that would benefit them for generations to come.

“Ichibi-sama blessed the union between the eldest son and daughter of the feuding families with a Great Seal, and it is said that he gave the newly crowned king and queen a promise – admittedly, I don’t know

what that is.” Vivi smiled ruefully.

“It was said that Ichibi-sama even put a Cursed Seal on the mouths of the warmongering fathers so that if they ever mentioned anything about war and betrayal to their children; if they tried to manipulate them, they would lose the ability to communicate in any form whatsoever. One father so much as tried to insinuate to his youngest son to betray his older brother for the crown, but the man promptly turned to stone. His statue actually resides in one of the palace’s meeting rooms where all peace talks take place, as a reminder.

“Ichibi in his benevolence, also gifted two people who were to be advisors and guardians from each of the families with Devil Fruit – these Fruit have been passed down in the Royal Family’s guardians for generations.”

“Whoa...”

“That’s so cool, ’ttebayou...”

“To think that I get the chance to meet not one but *two* Biju...” Vivi was elated. “I was told that I had childish hopes that the Biju could rescue us as you’ve been gone for years – centuries, even! But you’re real, and you’re *here!* ...I’m so relieved! If you could find it in your hearts, Biju-sama...*please*, help me save my people.”

“Well...um, we’ll help you where we can, ‘ttebayou?”

/ **“Oi, don’t tell her that!”** / Kyuubi didn’t like promising things he wasn’t sure he’d be able to deliver on - plus, Naruto shouldn’t be promising things in his place anyway.

“Thank you...” Vivi bowed again. “Thank you...that’s all I ask. My father and I will be eternally grateful.”

Luffy coughed then raised a hand up in the air. “Guys, we have to party for our *nakama* – we celebrated everyone, but not Ichibi and Kyuubi.” Luffy gave Naruto and Gaara an insistent look, “We *have* to celebrate *all* of our *nakama*.”

“Alright, fine.” Sanji said, his tone was one of long-held patience. “I’ll make sure to set some aside for our little Biju *nakama*.”

Thinking about Ichibi being someone who helped found a country and bring peace to it; Gaara thought of the Ichibi he’d known at the beginning of his life: angry, manipulative, blood-thirsty, and resentful

of Humanity. People thought that he was a monster to be feared, but Vivi... she had an entirely different view of him.

Gaara concentrated and went to see Ichibi.

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Within Gaara's mindscape, he found Ichibi sitting sort of curled into himself, and Ichibi seemed to be asleep, not even raising his head a bit when Gaara appeared. Usually, Ichibi was leaning as comfortably as he could get while looking peeved, and would occasionally slap his tail against the pillars and ground to make some sort of point.

"Ichibi?" Gaara started, but the Biju didn't seem to be paying any attention.

A strangely quiet rumble sounded, **"I'd rather be alone right now."**

Gaara nodded, even though he wasn't sure if Ichibi was paying any attention. Ichibi watched as Gaara left, letting out a heavy sigh. His thoughts were racing.

"I could sense them with my mystery power when we first met..." Luffy said casually, *"And I wanted to ask you guys about them so bad, but I figured I'd let you guys tell me on your own...besides,"* Luffy's grin widened; it was friendly, welcoming, and warm, *"They're basically our nakama too, right?"*

Then the others, foolishly, laughably, saying that the kids were there to stay, in spite of seeing a mere preview...

"Oh, you two aren't that scary," Pudding said, and she had genuinely meant it.

Vivi, bowing and begging for something so ridiculous. *Apologizing to him.* Having a person tell an incredible story and think so highly of him; it was disconcerting, not having memories of what was clearly a big deal to the foolish girl. Him, the Ichibi, *stopping* a war, and not participating or instigating? That was how those fools in the Elemental Nations saw him. He was a weapon. But Vivi...

Vivi was so incensed by the Biju being Sealed away, just like...that time...

Really, this situation was almost like...Ichibi recalled – like Ryuuma.

Usopp stood back and admired his handiwork. He had built a special shelf in the galley, and Gaara placed his odd figurines on one, as they both represented the Biju. A lower shelf was there so the crew could leave gifts, as it was really the only way Usopp could think to include their extra members.

Two dishes and two cups of sake were set aside, arranged beautifully by Pudding. She placed them on the shelf, and it looked very much like an official offering.

“Why are you two so inspired by the Biju?” Pudding asked as she sat down.

Vivi sent Pudding a look as if she had insulted the Royal Family.

“Because...that’s what they are?” Naruto replied unsure. “Why are you questioning it?”

Thinking of Mama, someone who could rage for days with unstoppable force and gorge herself on food and people alike, and in combination with her Conqueror’s Haki until she was satisfied or exhausted... The boys, or the Biju as they insisted on calling their power, paled in comparison.

“I’ve seen a person with incredible, unstoppable power before – nothing much stopped her – but the Biju...I’ve always thought that they were just stories... But you’re claiming that they’re real, and Vivi-chan has so much hope...” Pudding was quiet for a moment before she asked, “Could you-the Biju, really stop someone who seems unstoppable?”

“You bet!” Naruto replied without hesitation. “Me and my brothers are strong, and Kyuubi’s pretty much back up, ‘ttebayou.”

Naruto grinned satisfactorily at receiving an indignant snort from Kyuubi at being called “backup”.

“I see.” Pudding looked as if she wanted to say something else, but decided not to. The Biju were merely stories, after all. She had grown up reading them. Children’s stories to either scare children into behaving; or dream of fantastic, faraway lands. There were several islands out there that believed in the Biju as being something more; people that believed that the Biju would rescue them in their time of need. A fat lot of good that it did them.

Getting Vivi's hopes up for fairy tales and exploiting her faith...

The boys seemed genuine and honest. Like they weren't intending to manipulate Vivi's feelings.

The Biju were just stories, *weren't* they?

Not voicing her doubts for the sake of Vivi, because a person needed hope and something to believe in at times like this, Pudding simply smiled. "I'll make some desserts with some new recipes, so please tell me what you think when they're done."

Sanji was silent as well. While admittedly, the stories of the Biju he'd heard depicted them as beings of chaos, while others saw them as deities. In fact, he'd known several fishermen and hunters who prayed to the Dolphin-Horse who represented the sea and land, for a bountiful hunt. Sanji was fairly sure that the Dolphin-Horse was a Biju – the Gobi, but admittedly some illustrations and depictions were inconsistent.

There were even a few people who denied that the Dolphin-Horse was a Biju, and thought that saying those prayers was more of a superstitious tradition; a knock on wood sort of thing. But there were always those few who genuinely believed that if they didn't say their prayers and thanks to the Dolphin-Horse, they would go home empty handed.

Whatever the brats' power was, whatever they wanted to call it, Sanji didn't particularly care. Whatever that oppressive aura was, whatever it was that Luffy claimed was there, he didn't know. But the stories of the Biju made the creatures seem like something Humans could never hope to tame or even understand.

In Sanji's personal opinion, if the Biju were real, they'd be more impressive. They wouldn't exactly be inhabiting the bodies of a couple of kids. Hearing that they'd been Sealed into kids, and for those kids to be mistreated, struck a nerve. Shitty superstitions made people do shitty-stupid things.

So he stacked their plates high with nutritious food for growing boys and kept his thoughts to himself. He didn't want to start pointless arguments, and he could just see how much Vivi *needed* to believe that there were two Biju *here* right now.

At least the kids weren't exploiting her exactly.

“Hey, do the Bijū poop?” Luffy asked the important questions, of course.

Vivi gasped. “Luffy-san, don’t ask the Bijū-sama such inappropriate questions!”

Gaara winced, then said, “He’s laughing at both of you, and no, he doesn’t.”

“Oh~” Luffy was fascinated. “What sort of games does he play?”

“Oh! Good idea, Luffy!” Usopp bounced his fist in his palm. “We can play games through Gaara and Naruto! Like, if we play ‘rock, paper, scissors’, or some other game like that, the Bijū can just tell them what they want.”

“Yeah!” Luffy agreed. “Play with us sometime, guys!”

“Hey, what all can the Bijū do?” Nami asked the truly important questions. She coughed a bit. “After what happened on Little Garden, I don’t want something like that to happen again. Especially not with Marines; that’ll put way too much attention on us.”

“He’s the reason I have sand manipulation like I do,” Gaara replied. “I lost control because I saw that people I care about were in danger, but I-we won’t let it happen again.”

“Well, mostly I’ve gotten stronger and faster, and my eyes go red, ‘ttebayou.”

“Ask them for advice since it’s their power,” Zoro suggested, as if it were the most practical thing. “Train harder so that your body can withstand that rush of chakra, too.”

“Okay,” Gaara agreed. “I’ll train hard, Zoro-nii.”

“But Kyūubi’s always so stingy,” Naruto groaned, the Weight Seals on his arms and legs already feeling heavier despite Zoro not even touching them yet.

Gaara approached Nami and held up a sheet of paper and a pen to her. He didn’t exactly look at her as he shyly asked, “Nami, can you write down the character *nakama* for me? Please?”

“Sure,” Nami replied and wrote down 仲間 in her neat handwriting.

Gaara thanked her and ran off.

For a moment, Nami felt light-headed, but brushed it off. She was probably tired from everything that happened at Little Garden.

She glanced at Zoro with some concern when he tried to lift weights. After a few sets of swinging the oversized dumbbell, Zoro doubled over in a hacking cough that sounded particularly violent.

“Maybe you shouldn’t push yourself...” Nami suggested, hoping she didn’t sound too insistent.

Zoro finished coughing before he answered, “If I can’t withstand a few stupid coughing fits when I’m just training, how can I call myself a decent Swordsman if it happens in a real fight?”

“Okay, maybe you have *some* logic, but that doesn’t mean its sound.” Nami thought of poor Doctor Nako, who was practically pulling his beard out when it came to Zoro.

“I have to overcome this!” Zoro was very determined. He began swinging the dumbbell again.

He probably would have looked much cooler if he hadn’t started coughing.

“That does it,” Nami put her hands on her hips and stood with as much authority she could muster. “I’m not watching you do this to yourself. I’m telling you to rest – and no working out. You’re making your lungs worse.”

“Why should I?” Zoro complained.

Nami crossed her arms. “I’ll tell Naruto and Gaara that you’re making yourself sick.”

Zoro made a face. He cringed, and Nami received a glare. As if she *wouldn’t dare* essentially tattling to the younger brothers.

“Fine.” Zoro muttered with a defeated pout. Zoro Sealed the dumbbells away, complaining about not being able to train under his breath.

It was quite satisfying that a mere threat was all it took. It was also sweet that both the younger brothers had their older brother so

wrapped around their fingers. Nami wondered what else she could manipulate Zoro into doing if she just mentioned Naruto and Gaara. Maybe she could rope them in on helping...

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Gaara stared at himself in the bathroom mirror and took a deep breath. Carefully, he used his own sand to carve 仲間 on the left side of his forehead. Gaara smothered several colorful curses into his scarf throughout the entire process.

But it would be worth it. He wanted reminders for what the others had said; that they hadn't turned him and his brothers away in spite of what had happened. *Nakama* was something precious. Ichibi could certainly use the reminder as well, Gaara was sure.

Gaara's bangs mostly covered his newly acquired tattoo, not that he minded. It was personally for him. He wouldn't show it off unless the others asked.

Usopp was the first one to notice. "Gaara, what's on your forehead?"

Gaara pushed his bangs back. He fidgeted a little as he explained his reasoning. "It's something precious, and this is the first time someone's considered me their *nakama*...so, I just...wanted to always be reminded of it. What...what do you think, Usopp?"

"Hmm...I think it makes you look cool."

Usopp was on the receiving end of a *look* as Gaara beamed at him. "Thanks, Usopp."

"Whoa, Gaara!" Luffy grinned when he saw. "That's so cool!"

"How'd you manage that, 'ttebayou?" Naruto asked.

"I used my sand to carve it."

Naruto shivered at that answer, and wished he hadn't asked.

Zoro just pushed Gaara's bangs back for a few seconds, and then affectionately ruffled his hair.

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Looking at the bite on her stomach, Nami made a face. It wasn't itchy, but it looked red and swollen almost like hives, with a spreading

bruise that looked splotchy. It felt somewhat sore, but she rubbed on a salve to fight infection just in case. Maybe she was allergic to something? She took an anti-allergen, just in case.

Outside, Nami stumbled a bit on the deck, but was able to catch herself. Seriously, her body felt a bit heavy, almost as if she hadn't slept a full night. She began coughing and spit up a nasty mix of phlegm and wax.

"Wonderful," she muttered under her breath as she wiped the stuff off of her hand with a tissue. She felt lightheaded for a few seconds, but brushed it off. She checked the weather, and everything looked fine.

A News Coo was flying overhead, so Nami waved it down.

The bird squawked at her as she placed a few coins into its pouch. She took a newspaper and said, "This is more expensive than last time! I'm not paying another cent next time, got that?"

The bird merely squawked, which was likely the avian equivalent of shrugging its shoulders. The News Coo took off to continue its deliveries.

Nami's eyes scanned the newspaper, and she made a face. Stealing a glance at Vivi, who was talking to Pudding about something – and then Usopp happily contributed as well. Nami shook her head, and folded the newspaper to put in her desk. They had plenty of time, nothing to worry about.

"You smell weird, 'ttebayou." Naruto said, very out of the blue.

"Gee, thanks, Naruto." Nami tapped him on the head with the newspaper and glared.

"No, not like that!" Naruto quickly defended. "Uh, I mean...you just smell *off*, 'ttebayou..."

"Uh-huh." Nami poked Naruto's forehead with the newspaper. "Don't ever tell a girl that she smells bad, Naruto. Anyway, please put this in my desk, would you?"

Taking the newspaper without a word, Naruto added a quick, "You do smell funny!" before he took off to carry out Nami's request.

"Tch!" The nerve! She didn't smell bad! She'd taken a bath this morning. Nami sniffed herself just in case. She could only smell her

shampoo and body wash. She'd even put on deodorant. What could Naruto smell?

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"You smell weird," Gaara commented very dryly the next day and several hours later.

Nami only glared. Her sarcastic reply was, "You smell funny."

Tilting his head, Gaara replied, "But I don't smell, I bathed yesterday."

Nami felt groggy, too tired to roll her eyes. Actually, it hurt to roll her eyes. She looked at the food that Sanji had placed next to her on the railing and the sight of it made her feel nauseous. The smell was something awful. Normally, orange-glazed chicken was her favorite food, except she couldn't stand it right now.

Nami knew she was getting sick, but chose to ignore it. It was just a cold, or something. If people got too concerned over her, than they wouldn't make it in time...

"Nami, are you okay?" Vivi's voice seemed to float through Nami's head. "You look so pale..."

"I'm fine, no worries!" Nami waved her off.

But Vivi reached forward anyway and pressed a hand against Nami's forehead.

"Nami-san, you're burning up!" Vivi sounded horrified, because of how hot Nami's forehead was. There was *no way* Nami should even be moving around in her state!

Suddenly Nami yelled, "Turn the ship!" Nami stumbled, but steadied herself on the railing. "Turn the ship thirty-degree starboard! Gaara, shield our port and stern!"

Nami started coughing and wheezing, and collapsed to her knees. Fortunately, Vivi held onto Nami so that she didn't fall and get hurt. Vivi rubbed Nami's back as she went into a nasty coughing fit that sounded like it was coming from deep within her lungs.

The crew moved without question, and they stared at the massive rain and lightning storm that struck the ocean where their ship had been moments ago.

Vivi was impressed that Nami could sense that storm, and not only that; she knew just how far they had to go so that they could easily stay on course without much correction.

“Nami!” Luffy reached for Nami’s face to give her a few light slaps to wake her up. He rapidly pulled his hand away, though. “Ow! Hot!”

“She’s *really* burning up!” Vivi was worried. “We need to cool her off, quickly!”

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They put Nami into bed, and Vivi quickly retrieved a cold cloth and pressed it to Nami’s forehead.

“This isn’t good,” Vivi turned to the others, “Do any of you have any medical knowledge?”

Vivi’s face fell when everyone pointed at Nami.

“If she were starving, Sanji-dear and I could make her something.” Pudding answered.

“If she was cut-up injured, we could do something,” Gaara said.

“*Seriously?* Haven’t *any* of you ever been sick?!”

She received various replies consisting of “nope”.

“Are you people even Human?” Vivi sighed. At least she understood with Gaara and Naruto, and Three-Eyed Tribe members could be considered a separate class of Human. But *still*.

“She just has to sleep it off, she’ll be fine.” Zoro said.

“Don’t put Nami-swan on the same level as you, moss-brain.”

“She just needs meat, then.” Luffy suggested.

“Don’t put her on your level either!”

“Bushido-san, Luffy-san, this isn’t a normal fever,” Vivi explained, “I don’t know if it’s something she can just sleep off. We probably should get a doctor for the three of you anyway, because of the non-stop coughing.”

Nami started wheezing, so Vivi and Pudding propped her up. Just

then, Nami woke up and began trying to move.

“Nami-san, hold still!” Vivi gently pushed at the other girl’s shoulders to encourage her to settle down.

“Vivi...desk...newspaper...” Nami pointed. “Na-Naruto... newspaper...”

Naruto was the one to grab the requested newspaper, and Nami pointed to Vivi.

Handing the newspaper over, Vivi began to read, and her eyes filled with horror. “No...no...!”

Her people... She read how people were defecting from her father’s army, and were joining the rebels’ faction. With this latest defection, her father’s army was now outnumbered by several hundred thousand. Her hands shook.

“This means...a million of my people are going to die!” Vivi started crying. She had to hold onto hope, she didn’t have much choice at this point.

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The Pirates had left it up to her to decide what they should do, since it was her country in the balance. Vivi didn’t need that long to think, she knew what she had to do. She stepped out onto the deck.

“Listen,” Vivi announced. “It’s important that we get to Alabasta as soon as possible, so let’s hurry and find Nami a doctor!” Smiling softly, she looked in the directions of the Jinchuuriki – or more specifically, Kyuubi and Ichibi. “I don’t have to worry too much, because both of you are here, and even if...even if a few people die, I know you can stop them before it gets worse. Ichibi-sama saved Alabasta in the past, he can do it again.”

“What if they can’t stop the people fighting, though?” Usopp spoke up. He didn’t intend to discourage her, really. He was asking an honest question that was a legitimate concern.

“It’s not what I want, but I *know* the Biju *can* save Alabasta!” Vivi looked down, not meeting their eyes. “If they can’t, then...if they don’t stop fighting...” Her shoulders shook but she looked up determinedly. “My people *will* listen, they *have* to!”

“And if they don’t?” Zoro now asked.

Vivi’s reply was just loud enough for them to hear. “...Then I won’t hold it against you, because you tried.”

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There was a memory nagging at Ichibi. He took a deep breath and focused, trying to will the memory forward.

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Ichibi was standing at the base of a cliff, watching the sunset. It was peaceful, but inwards, his emotions were turbulent. He roared as he swiped his arm across the cliff, sending more than a few boulders flying. They landed several miles away in the nearby forest; either landing with a booming impact or rolling a mile or so before stopping. He could see flocks of birds take flight to escape, loudly complaining about being displaced.

He then flopped to the ground in a huff, stirring up dirt. Ichibi stared at the ground in front of him.

“Wow, Tanuki-san...” Ryuuma walked up, his sword casually held over his shoulder. He momentarily eyed the newly designed landscape before asking, “What’s with the redecorating?”

Ichibi sent a side glance at Ryuuma. What Human could possibly understand his plight? But Ryuuma was simply asking; and not demanding. He considered not answering and simply be left to wallow in his misery, but...Ryuuma stood there looking expectantly at him.

“Some fuckin’ stupid war in a fuckin’ stupid country. I should have left them all to die.”

Ryuuma blinked a few times and whistled, then sat down on the cliff’s edge. “...It sounds like it went bad? What happened?”

*He was still bitter, though, the memories of the insufferable Humans and their war. Testily he asked, “**Why do you care, Ryuuma-san? It involves your own kind dying.**”*

“People die every day.” Ryuuma simply shrugged. “It’s obviously bothering you.”

Perhaps Ryuuma could offer some sort of insight. He was Human himself, after all. Ichibi exhaled. **"I went to stop a civil war – it'd been dragging on and off for years. At times, it seemed like those people had their shit together, only for it to go to worse shit than it was before. This time though, it got really bad. Far too bad to ignore, so I went to handle it."**

Ichibi was silent before he slammed a fist into the ground, causing the area around them to shake. Ryuuma leaned back a little to ensure he didn't go tumbling to the ground hundreds of feet below him. If he did fall, hopefully Ichibi would catch him.

Ryuuma sat up, and glanced over at Ichibi, who looked like a forlorn child if he were to be honest. He kept that thought to himself. "Things didn't go as planned?"

"There were dumbasses who still wanted to fuckin' fight, even though I tried to negotiate. So even after being warned, I had to kill those who wouldn't stand down. And the ones who were left standing, the ones I saved from their suffering..." Ichibi was silent before rumbling quietly, **"They called me a monster, and started threatening me – and – some even tried to kill me. Not that they could do much...but I... ended up killing several more...and even used a few Seals to make a point."** that certainly hadn't helped things. **"My sister says I should have just left when things were going bad."**

But he had wanted to do more. To be something for the people when they so desperately needed it. Except...

"You aren't a monster, Tanuki-san." Ryuuma was smiling up at him, in a gentle, sad sort of way. It was honestly such a strange expression on Ryuuma's face that Ichibi was taken aback for a moment. His voice was sad as he continued. "I think... applying 'monster' to you is a loose term. I mean, even Humans can be monsters. You've seen what Humans are capable of, yet they dare to call you and your siblings, monsters. Tsk, tsk, tsk!"

Ryuuma reached over and patted Ichibi on his nose. "I've seen Humans do some pretty bad things to each other, especially when they think they can get away with it and do. But sometimes, you have those folks who simply don't want to be saved. Who knows why? Maybe they don't like the idea of peace because to them that would mean they no longer have a purpose. People want to fight; but not how the Giants like doing things."

Ryuuma shrugged lopsidedly. "At least, that's what an old man I met at a

bar on the Outside said to me, once. Seems like it applies here, huh?"

Humans were prideful, feeble, curious creatures. Some of them came to the Bijū filled with respect and awe. Others feared the Bijū; or saw them as nothing more than weapons that could end wars for a price. What an insult it was, attempting to bribe the Bijū to win a war!

"You've heard the stories about us, and have seen what the Bijū are capable of casually – and I told you that I killed a bunch of Humans...and you still aren't afraid?"

"And why would I be? You're my friends – I'd kill for you." Ryūuma gave a laugh, as if he had told a joke Ichibi wasn't in on but should still understand anyway. "Not that I'd ever have to, I mean, you're the Bijū. Not even armies stand a chance. People need you, you know? The Bijū – they've saved Wano before, and you've saved me personally, for that I'll always be grateful. I owe you for that."

Ichibi stared at Ryūuma – what a ridiculous Human that he was. But that statement – well, there was more than one statement, actually. Something in Ichibi, his emotions were no longer storming within him. In fact, calm bemusement was in its place. Ryūuma was a very strange individual.

They were silent as the sun went down. When the sun finally disappeared beyond the horizon; and a crescent moon took its place, and the stars were like thousands of pinpricks in the sky, Ichibi's rumbling voice broke the silence:

"Shukaku."

Ryūuma jerked to look up at Shukaku. "What?"

Shukaku smiled down at the Human – it was more of a smirk, really.

"Shukaku. That's my name, Ryūuma-san."

A smile spread across Ryūuma's face – a Bijū giving someone their name, it was a great honor. For there had been many people in the past who had known the Bijū their entire lives, and had never earned even one name.

"It's nice to meet you, Shukaku-san."

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"What?" Gaara voiced aloud, from where he was sitting at the table

with the others. A few of the people stopped what they were doing to look at Gaara, who had unexpectedly spoken up.

“Hmm? Sand-brat?” Zoro looked at him.

“Gaara, you alright?” Usopp asked.

Gaara looked spaced out for a second before his eyes widened and a grin spread across his face. “Shukaku! His name is Shukaku! Zoro-nii! Ichibi – Shukaku gave me his name! He said it was alright to tell you guys, this is the best!”

It was surprising to the crew that Gaara could actually be *loud*.

Luffy whooped, and was undeterred by a coughing fit. He could feel the excitement from Gaara and the calm amusement from Shukaku, “That’s amazing!”

Gaara was so elated, and Vivi began crying again, with so much joy – because she understood the significance of such an act. “Thank you, Shukaku-sama.”

Zoro was tackled into a hug from Gaara, and Zoro fumbled his drink a bit, but he kept it in place with his Chakra. Zoro simply grinned with pride. “Good job, Sand-brat.” With a smirk, Zoro raised his bottle, “It’s nice to meet you, Shukaku.”

For Shukaku, it was almost like seeing Ryuuma again.

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Kyuubi couldn’t voice his frustrations enough. For his brother to give his name out so easily like that, Kyuubi scoffed. Shukaku had always been the sentimental one. Having a love for Humans... Wait...Kyuubi shook his head. Since *when* did Shukaku care about Humans? He hated them, and wanted nothing but bloodshed.

Kyuubi’s thoughts were interrupted when he had a visitor. His eyes narrowed when he saw Naruto approach him.

“So...Shukaku gave Gaara his name...”

Naruto put his hands behind his back and dug his toe into the rock he was standing on. He then looked up at Kyuubi expectantly. Naruto also tried adding puppy-dog eyes.

Kyuubi narrowed his eyes. “**No.**”

“What?! Why not, ‘ttebayou?!”

“Because I’m not as foolish and impulsive as my brother.”

Naruto huffed and pouted, then stuck out his tongue. “Spoilsport! I’ll get you to tell me your name, no matter what!”

Naruto was gone, and he was pouting *loudly*, ensuring that Kyuubi could feel how annoyed Naruto was at Gaara earning Shukaku’s name – hell, he even felt the jealousy that lingered in the back of Naruto’s mind.

Kyuubi rolled his eyes at how childish Naruto could be.

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Kyuubi could see the desperation and the hope in Vivi’s expression. Her love and determination for the people of Alabasta was to be admired.

It was a difficult thing to admit, but...he had no idea what she wanted. He didn’t know what he was supposed to *do*.

There was something at the back of Kyuubi’s mind. A distant memory eating away at him...and Kyuubi forced his way through it, trying to pull the memory to the surface. Something triggered when Vivi spoke of the Biju and saving her country... then that something within his memories, of a time so very, very long ago slowly began to surface...

As unfortunate a thing it is, sometimes wars must be fought.

Humans justify their wars in numerous ways; sometimes, the war is about conquering lands and its people; sometimes they are fought to overthrow a tyrant. Humans can easily settle these things between themselves with the right sort of people taking charge.

Giants have a unique view on war; for them, it is about honor above all else. If anything, it is a group of people gathering together to fight and settle their differences and no-one dies as a result – or if death is required, it is an honorable death. But even Giants will succumb to greed, jealousy, and hatred, and they will go to war for blood.

[***]

Several hundred years ago, somewhere in Elbaf:

Kyuubi sat amidst a battlefield; the smell of rot and burned flesh was in the

air. There was wailing as Giants removed their helmets and collapsed to their knees next to their former comrades; brothers-in-arms burned beyond recognition.

A Giant slowly walked up and sat down next to Kyuubi. Actually, it was more like he collapsed in exhaustion and defeat.

He removed his helmet and his gauntlets then ran his hands through his mane of hair and over his face. No matter how hard he tried to hide it, it was clear that he had been crying. In fact, he was crying still, and couldn't hold back his tears.

"This isn't what I wanted, Kyuubi-sama." His voice sounded broken. More like a small child's, really. Not like the hardened warrior that he was.

"No-one ever does, Tjorvi." Kyuubi responded with a grumble.

"He was my brother! I tried talking to him, and—we—I...I could have gotten through to him, if I'd had just a little more time..."

Kyuubi sighed heavily, his chest rumbled with the action. Clearly, the Giant had been trying to convince himself of what could have been. Mortals, even the ones who lived for a few centuries, had foolish notions such as these.

"How much longer, Tjorvi? When your fields burned, and the widowed and orphans wept for their losses? When your people starved? When your country became nothing more than a distant memory that no longer exists on future maps?"

"But you have siblings too..." Tjorvi reasoned. "Surely, you've given them second chances to redeem themselves, somehow..."

Kyuubi shrugged. **"I wouldn't know. Us Bijū, we aren't like the traditional families. Yeah, we've had our differences and petty squabbles, but the future of a freaking country has never been in the middle of our disputes."**

Tjorvi said again, *"I could have gotten through to him...If only--"*

"Tjorvi, the moment when Geiter wouldn't listen to even *me* meant that such drastic actions *had* to be taken. *This*," Kyuubi flicked one of his tails towards the bloody and burned devastation around them, **"was what we wanted to avoid. *This* was what they were warned about, and they *wouldn't* stand down."**

Tjorvi looked so lost. *"I don't understand how things could have gone so*

wrong...my precious younger brother – he –“ Tjorvi choked back a sob. “I don’t know why he did what he did! I want to understand! Was he suffering and I failed to notice?! Did he resent me?! Was it something I did? Did I cause some sort of overlooked slight that festered in his soul?!”

Kyuubi looked up at the sky as it started to rain. How ironically and annoyingly poignant.

“He wanted war, plain and simple, Tjorvi. It wasn’t anything you or your parents did or didn’t do.” Kyuubi looked at Tjorvi pointedly and scoffed. “Something you have to remember, Tjorvi, is that not all Clans share the same honor and ideals. The Elemental Nations is rife with Clans who were once a close-knit family unit that are divided by beliefs, politics, greed, the list goes on – and *those* things, are caused by *even more* reasons.” Kyuubi softly added, “Sometimes, those reasons are justifiable and completely understandable. Other times, those people are like Geiter – they just want violence, because they *can*.”

Kyuubi had felt Geiter’s greed and bloodlust so strongly he could taste it, along with his fury at being told to stand down and come to a peaceful resolution. The men and women who had joined him reveled in the violence Geiter caused.

Tjorvi buried his face in his hands. “I feel so lost, Kyuubi-sama. What am I supposed to do?”

Kyuubi looked out at the Giants, who were still mourning the losses of their brothers in blood and arms.

“You need to be strong, for them. You need to pick up the broken pieces and continue living for the sake of others. And try to avoid wars that will drive your country to ruin.”

“How am I supposed to do that? After all this?”

“I suppose...remember the pain of having to fight your loved ones over something so petty. So empty and pointless. This isn’t something you get over... You just...keep moving forward. Tell the truth. Don’t forget what happened and don’t try to justify Geiter’s actions too much...because then someone will twist the words and sympathize with him, and there could be another situation like this one.

“Hmm, tell future generations of the mistakes that were made and what you wish had been done differently – what *should* have

been done differently, and be sure to implement that. Not knowing your history is a dangerous thing, especially if it's your own."

Tjorvi didn't seem to know what to say to that. Finally, he murmured, "I suppose that's true, Kyuubi-sama..." he took a deep breath and let it out heavily in clear exhaustion. "I...I'm going to burn my... Geiter now...he needs his funeral rights, all of them do. Even after what he did, he still deserves at least that much." Tjorvi glanced up at the sky. "I can't...do that just yet, though. The rain is...there's too much of it..."

Kyuubi watched as Tjorvi got up and walked away. The Fox pitied him. The air was unpleasant.

"Hey, Tjorvi..." Kyuubi said, getting the Giant's attention, "I'm sorry that I couldn't... that it came down to this."

Tjorvi offered a kind, tired smile. "It's like you said, Kyuubi-sama... Geiter..." Tjorvi broke. He had been holding back earlier. Tears and snot mixed with the rain running down his face. He covered his face with a hand. "He wouldn't listen, and there was no other choice."

Kyuubi remained silent as the Giant sobbed, loudly, truly letting out all of his frustrations and emotions.

After a while, Tjorvi pulled himself together, mostly. He was still sniffing, but he managed, "Thank you, for doing what you could, Kyuubi-sama."

Kyuubi only nodded. He didn't bother to shake the rain from his fur as he stood. The sky was still thick with rainclouds and refused to let up. This was the least Kyuubi could do. He gave a fierce wave of his tails; and the force broke through the clouds, letting the sunlight through.

That was that, then. Kyuubi started to trod away before looking back one last time when someone called out to him.

Several of the Giants waved solemnly, before turning back to their task of ever so carefully separating the corpses and sorting them by the familial crests and unique designs on their armor – the only things that identified them. Others were constructing funeral pyres to properly send their dead off.

Ending wars was hardly a pleasant thing.

[***]

Kyuubi blinked. He thought of Vivi, being surrounded by burning, bleeding corpses. *'I didn't want anyone to die, but I don't blame you'*

She would be broken, and blame herself for bringing ruin to her country. That was what the Bijū are...except...she didn't see them like that.

"I know you can save my people," Vivi was so damn adamant of that.

He didn't know what Vivi expected him to do, and for some reason, he felt guilty.

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****East Blue; Dawn Island: Six-and-a-half Years Ago****

Much like his son and grandson, Garp would make unannounced entrances and laugh at everyone's annoyance. So, Garp burst into Dadan's house, and announced, *"I'm here for my precious grandsons! It's time for a training session!"*

All of the Bandits ceased their conversations and slowly turned and looked at Garp with wide eyes.

"Oh...welcome, Garp-san." Dogra said with an unnecessarily loud voice, while trying to not glance at the kitchen but horribly failing at it.

"How's the Marine life treating you, Garp-san?" Magra asked in an also unnecessarily loud voice.

"Garp, you need to take those two brats and keep them with you!" Dadan yelled, since she was much better at acting normal than some people.

"They'll be out of your hair when they become Marines." Garp waved a hand, brushing off Dadan's complaint.

This of course got both Ace and Luffy to protest becoming Marines.

"That was a long hike, and it's hot outside...I'm gonna grab a drink before we go." Garp started making his way towards the kitchen, when both of his grandkids suddenly grabbed him and were talking over each other.

"Let's go train now, old man!"

"I want meat, Grandpa!"

Garp patted their heads affectionately, causing Luffy to squirm away and Ace to huff and scowl. *"Just let me get a drink and we'll head out."*

"I can get it for you..." Kam started to offer, except Garp had now disappeared into the kitchen. *"Oh, no..."*

In the kitchen, Garp saw a new member of Dadan's Family.

"Oh, hi there!" Garp greeted. His smile fell when the guy turned to look at him with eyes drawn rather badly on his eyelids. One eye looked like a lazy eye and the other drifted into the guy's eyebrow.

"Good afternoon," the younger man greeted with a forced, wide smile. His voice held no real inflection. *"Ya must be Garp, I've heard so much about ya."*

"You're a strange guy!" Garp laughed as he patted the guy on the back, which felt more like heavy slaps to Touma. *"I'm Garp, Ace and Luffy's grandpa."*

Touma winced in discomfort, but also because he realized that he hadn't exactly thought of a fake name to use with Garp if he ever encountered the man.

"...Tona..." Touma replied, *"Nice t'meet ya."*

Garp laughed at this strange individual. He was certainly an eccentric guy.

The men in the kitchen didn't notice the face-palms, eye-rolls, and disbelieving looks being sent their way.

Garp sat down at the table with the other Bandits and he took a swig of his water before saying, *"There's another reason I'm here; you've heard about Black Dog Mongril and his crew by now, right?"*

"Yeah, that bastard's been causing a bit of trouble in Goa." Dadan stubbed her cigarette out.

Mongril had been making a name for himself in various parts of Goa for the past few months, but it hadn't really bothered Dadan all that much, since he had pretty kept to his side of Mt. Columbo, far away from her territory.

"I'm wondering if you can keep an eye out for them," Garp said. *"Black*

Dog's men beat an old shopkeeper and his wife to death a few days ago, which is a first, as they haven't killed anyone before that; only wounded – a few stiches here and there, but nothing so severe that someone died. Guess either they got more confident, or the robbery went severely out of hand. Judging by their trajectory, I think they may be headed here."

"Really, Garp? You're making us do your job?" Dadan complained. "Shoveling all this work on us."

"I'm not shoveling anything onto you, Dadan!" Garp laughed in his denial. "I'm just saying that I may just so happen to be looking the other way if your group comes across any of Black Dog's men and you very conveniently make our problems go away."

"Mongril can be petty and vengeful." Dadan stated, because she didn't want anything to do with the man. Defending her territory was one thing, but it was another when it was attacking Mongril's men without provocation – and hoping she could get away with it. It would be far better if Black Dog stayed on his side of Mount Columbo and left them alone.

"Hey, you'll get paid for it." Garp argued. "You can keep the spoils. It'll save us from having to pay you for turning him in."

"Fine, fine, you stingy bastard." Dadan reluctantly gave in. "But if at any point it looks like we're in over our heads, I'm going to protect my family by staying out of it and you can actually do your damn job!"

"Thanks, Dadan!"

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Garp was quick to notice that both Ace and Luffy moved differently when it came to their combat training. They were faster, and while their dodges weren't exactly perfect, the boys could certainly last longer with their inelegant dodging.

"This is very nice!" Garp praised. "At this rate you'll make fine Marines yet!"

Luffy stopped and stuck out his tongue. *"I'm not gonna be a Marine!"*

"Whatever." Ace scoffed. He crossed his arms and glared up with all the defiance he could muster. "There's no way I'll ever be a Marine, I'll be a Pirate."

"Yeah!" Luffy agreed as he mirrored Ace in crossing his arms. Instead of glaring, Luffy beamed. *"I'm gonna become the Pirate King."*

"Enough of that nonsense." Garp replied. *"It's far better for you to be a Marine, and Ace, you'll be at the age they accept applicants soon enough, so it's best that you're prepared-"*

"And wear one of those stupid, tacky outfits?" Ace cut Garp off. *"I wouldn't be caught dead in one of those things!"*

"Yeah!" Luffy nodded along.

Garp pressed the bridge of his nose. Not this again.

"I wanna be a Pirate, like Shanks." Luffy started saying. He was basically babbling in his excitement. *"I promised I'd give this hat back to him, so I have to be a Pirate-"*

"You aren't going to be a Pirate, Luffy!" Garp's voice raised unexpectedly.

"Why not?!" Luffy demanded. *"I wanna be a Pirate, I'll get an awesome crew, and I'll be the Pirate King!"*

"Hey!" Ace's voice joined in. *"What makes you think we even want to be Marines or have anything to do with those bastards?"*

"It's better for you to be Marines than Pirates! You don't need to have a bounty on your head, either of you," Garp pointed at Ace, *"Especially you!"*

"So, if I don't become a Marine, I have to waste away here, and live out a boring life? It's not like being a Marine is any safer than being a Pirate."

"Being a Pirate means you won't have any protection-"

"Oh, you're going to protect us? From what? And why would I – why would anyone want to join people like the Marines?"

"I don't wanna be a Marine, at all! Ever never! No way!" Luffy felt like he had something important to add to the conversation. *"They don't party, eat meat, or have adventures! And they always have rules."*

Luffy made a face at the mere thought of *rules*.

"Enough of that nonsense!" Garp's voice took on an unexpected hard edge. *"I'll say it as many times as I have to! You aren't going to be a*

Pirate!"

Luffy looked close to tears in his frustration. *"But I don't wanna be a Marine!"*

"You don't get to be the one to decide that!" Ace shot back, glaring at Garp. *"Here you leave us with Dadan for months at a time, only show up every once in a while when it suits you, and you want us to just be shut up in a cage! That's basically what the Marines are!"*

"Listen here, you two," Garp's voice had raised quite a bit and he might as well have been yelling at those new recruits who thought that being a Marine was simply living life out on a boat with matching uniforms as a bonus. *"You two are going to be Marines, and that's final! If you weren't so connected to that damn hat and the Red-Haired bastard who put that pipe dream in your head, I'd toss it out!"*

Luffy clutched his beloved straw hat protectively. *"NO! You can't have Shank's hat!"*

Ace felt hot – even though the evening was cool. *"You bastard! When are you gonna get it through your thick head that neither of us want to be Marines?! We're going to be Pirates!"*

"Absolutely not! I am not going to hunt either of you down, not like your –" Garp cut himself off from whatever it was he was saying, and sighed. Taking a deep breath, he let it out as he tried calming down. This conversation was going in circles. He looked every bit his age, just then. *"Look, it's better if you two become Marines, instead of simply staying on Dawn – or becoming Pirates."*

"I'm gonna be the Pirate King, and that's final!" Luffy shot back.

"Hey, Old Man..." Ace's fists clenched. He felt so hot he might just burst into flames. *"What about the Tenryuubito?"*

"The Tenryuubito?" Garp asked. The change in topic was unexpected. *"What about them?"*

"The Marines are essentially their lapdogs, right?" Ace glared at the ground by Garp's feet before looking up at the man. *"They snap their fingers, say 'jump' and you ask how high."*

"What's that got to do with anything, you brat? Where'd you even hear about 'em anyway?"

“Those bastards are the ones who killed Sabo! Magra told us everything! You really think that either of us are going to work for the people who freaking murdered our brother?!” Ace snarled. *“Or do you even care?!”*

At the thought of Sabo, Luffy stared at the ground and fidgeted.

“Ace, you brat!” Garp threw his hands in the air. *“What makes you think I don’t care?!”*

“Because that guy was never brought to justice! Aren’t Marines all about that crap?! Or is it when it only applies to people who don’t have you by the balls?!” Ace grabbed Luffy’s arm. *“Come on, Lu. We’re leaving.”* Turning to glower at Garp over his shoulder, *“We’re tired, so we’re heading back.”*

“I’ll turn you two into fighting fit Marines even if it kills me!” Garp yelled. But it felt like an empty statement.

Neither boy turned back to look at him. Luffy almost did, but Ace said something to him and Luffy quickly turned to face forwards.

Garp silently stared at the boys as they disappeared into the forest. He sighed as he scratched at the back of his neck. This was far too complicated. The boys took after their parents in the best and worst ways. Far too free-spirited and strong-willed. They were so stubborn, that it was like the immovable object meeting the unstoppable force.

But this was for the best, he told himself. It was far better to become a Marine for everyone involved.

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The boys could see the ocean from where they were, and a few stars were already out. They had often stared out at the distant horizon talking about their dreams of seeing what was beyond what they could see. There were places that were just pictures in the books Kam showed them; places that Touma told them about; and they desperately wanted to see those places for themselves.

As they were heading back when they ran into someone.

“Maggie!” Luffy wrapped his arms around her leg.

Ace scolded, *“You really shouldn’t wander out here at this time of day because of the tigers.”*

"Oh! Hi, Luffy, Ace." Maggie greeted them happily. She brushed a few strands of her dark purple hair out of her face.

Maggie worked with Makino at her bar as a cook and waitress plus, she was Kam's older sister. She was one of the few people of Goa who willingly traversed the mountains with little to no concern for the beasts that roamed the island. They'd never bothered her, so by her own logic, she would be fine.

"I couldn't just sit around waiting for Kam to see me, you know. He never comes down the mountain."

"You're bringing food again?" Ace asked, and he reached out with a silent offer to carry one of the bags on her shoulders. *"Huh...I didn't realize it was already the third Wednesday of the month."*

"Yep! Also medical supplies, along with washed and mended clothing." Maggie handed Ace a bag, and gave Luffy one as well. *"I know Bandits are pretty self-sufficient, but I still worry."*

She studied the boys for a moment and frowned. *"Are you two alright?"*

"Stupid grandpa!" Luffy huffed.

"The old man's so insistent on us being Marines." Ace complained.

Maggie was silent for a few seconds before smiling softly and saying, *"Garp cares, but he just doesn't know how to say it. He's trying to show you, but...eh...he's not very good at showing it, either. I'm sure he wants you to be safe, and be able to take care of yourselves when he's no longer around. Being a Marine is sort of insurance, I guess."*

"But he's such a jerk about it!" Luffy whined a little, but he didn't really care. He felt entitled to a little whining after talking with his grandpa.

"He's always trying to control us." Ace added as he kicked a rock.

Maggie winked at them, *"Try to get along with Garp, and understand him. Take his training for what it is."*

"He's training us to be Marines, nothing else."

Maggie ran her fingers through Ace's hair, disheveling it even more. She just laughed as he scowled at her.

"You need a proper haircut young man, we'll do that back at the house." Maggie stated, and Ace scoffed but didn't protest. *"Anyway, you two*

need to get along with your grandfather, and listen to him."

"But he doesn't listen to us! Why should we listen to him?" Luffy whined. "I tell him I wanna be a Pirate, and he hits me."

Maggie winced, as she had witnessed Garp's "Fist of Love" more than once.

"Yes, but...don't take his training for granted. You can still follow those crazy dreams of yours. You two are his precious grandkids, and he has a lot of responsibilities." Maggie shrugged. *"You being Pirates means he might just have to prioritize his job over family."*

"What does 'prioritize' mean?" Luffy asked.

"It means he'll have to decide what's more important; you two as his family, or his role as a Marine."

Ace scoffed and picked up a small rock. He threw it at a tree, clearly frustrated. *"Being a Marine, that means rules, rules, rules – and being a Government lapdog."* Ace looked up at Maggie. *"They killed Sabo, Maggie. And Gramps actually wants us to work for the people that did it."*

Maggie nodded, understandingly.

"One thing you could do is go ahead and enter the Marines, and then a few weeks in suddenly realize that that life isn't for you, and just leave. That way, you can still sort of meet your grandpa's expectations, but still become a Pirate."

Surprised, Ace stared at Maggie who shrugged. Honestly, working in a bar or not; she didn't really seem the type to be encouraging people to become criminals.

"...Or, just stop talking about being Pirates, take Garp's training for what it is, and then one day...you just leave for your adventure before you have to leave for recruitment."

"You're so smart, Maggie!" Luffy praised.

Perhaps Maggie shouldn't be encouraging kids to commit the crime of Piracy, but she could see how the boys' eyes lit up whenever they spoke of Roger and Pirates. How their expressions looked when they stared out at the horizon. Those were flames that simply couldn't and shouldn't be snuffed. She couldn't really picture them being Marines, anyway.

Present Day

Naruto and Gaara kept an eye on the Log Pose while they sailed along seemingly aimlessly. Or at least, it felt that way. Nami was gradually getting sicker. Pudding and Sanji were doing all they could to make sure her fever stayed down and got fluids so she wouldn't get dehydrated or malnourished. Both of them seemed particularly concerned, and their combined nerves made Luffy anxious.

Nami did wake up for a few minutes during the night to see that everyone was in the cabin asleep, and Gaara was sitting at the foot of her bed very much awake. He was messing with his sand, rolling bits of it between his fingers.

"Nami?" he asked when he noticed she was awake. Gaara looked almost hopeful that she'd gotten better.

Nami remembered that one night when she first met Luffy and the others; how Gaara was pretty much in the same position back then as he was now. He looked more concerned and relieved here and now; instead of suspicious and creepy. His presence was a source of comfort now; and not of fear.

She was happy that the crew cared so much.

Nami smiled at him. Her voice was weak as she whispered, "I'm glad you're here, Gaara-kun."

She was asleep again before Gaara could respond.

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The weather started to gradually get colder, and Vivi was relieved. "This consistent weather means that we're getting close to an island."

The Log Pose's needle was also showing promise of a nearby island. They could only hope that they could find it sooner rather than later.

"Joy." Gaara said flatly.

Vivi had to hide her amused smile, since Gaara had bundled his scarf around his head so only his eyes were visible. He also had on more than one layer, so he sort of waddled rather than walked. He also couldn't put his arms down by his sides; instead they stuck nearly

straight out.

There was also the issue that he was barefoot – which now was coming back to bite him.

It looked as if he could topple over and not be able to get back up again without help. Usopp had the bright idea of attempting to push Gaara over, but was immediately deterred.

“Don’t *even*.” Gaara practically snarled without even turning around. Usopp scampered away because the possibility of losing a finger or a limb wasn’t worth it.

Gaara didn’t think it could get any worse, but then it started snowing. Gaara was even more miserable because people were thinking that this weather was “fun”. They had the nerve to *make* things with snow.

Naruto had never seen snow before, and was elated. It was even more exciting that a concept like snowball fights existed.

Unfortunately, Luffy couldn’t seem to play for as long as he would’ve liked because he kept doubling over into hacking coughs that sometimes had specks of blood in whatever he coughed up.

“Seriously, Gaara, you should have shoes on in weather like this.” Usopp chided. He shivered at Gaara’s glare, which was icier than the weather. So instead, he focused on his snow sculpture.

“Think of it as training, sand-brat.”

That suggestion only earned a narrow-eyed glare.

“My feet are probably going to fall off if I train.”

Pudding rolled her eyes and presented Gaara with a pair of snow shoes. “Didn’t you know you had these? Nami-chan was the one to think of buying them.”

Nami had also bought the boys several outfits for the various climates they could encounter.

Gaara finally relented wearing the snow boots. Moving around was awkward, and having his feet stuffed into the shoes contributed to his misery.

Luffy was earning plenty of glares from Gaara for not seeming to care about the cold in the slightest.

“How are you not even cold, Luffy-san?” Vivi asked.

“Huh?” Luffy questioned, before he started rubbing his arms and shivering. “It’s s-so cold!”

“How are you realizing that *now*?” Sanji questioned. He grinned as he presented his snow sculptures to Vivi and Pudding. He’d definitely captured their beauty!

“Here’s a jacket, Luffy-sweetie,” Pudding handed Luffy a long, red jacket before going to admire her sculpture.

“I wish one of Captain’s toes would fall off.” Gaara irritably and very miserably muttered under his breath.

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They encountered a man who could stand on the ocean. At first, it had a few members of the crew wondering if he was using chakra. But then, it turned out he was standing on a submarine.

He had soldiers with him who asked (more like demanded) if they had an Eternal Pose to someplace called ‘Drum’.

While they were talking, a man who very unwelcomely boarded Merry, took a chunk out of Merry’s railing by biting it; much to everyone’s shock.

“My carvings!” Gaara glared at the man, who was trying to eat their ship. He’d worked hard on those! There was also another very important factor; more important than his carvings. A large tendril of sand wrapped around the man’s ankle. Neither the man nor his cohorts had time to react.

“Stop eating our ship! It’s too damn cold!”

With a snarl, Gaara whirled the man over his head, then released him to fly away over several miles.

His companions blinked owlishly before it finally seemed to register what had happened.

“You dare treat the great Wapol like that?”

“Oi, your Captain’s a Devil Fruit user, right?” Sanji thoughtfully pointed out.

“Drowning at sea...how poetic.” Pudding cheerfully said. “I do wonder how long he’ll last.”

The men finally seemed to realize that their Captain couldn’t swim, and would likely drown if they didn’t hurry up and go get him. They quickly boarded their ship.

As they sailed away, the men yelled out at the crew:

“You better not forget this!”

“Remember us!”

“Please remember us!”

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It was with great relief that they came upon an island. They could only hope that it was populated.

“There are people!” Luffy announced, being able to sense them before he saw them. He coughed a bit.

“Stay right where you are, Pirates!”

Luffy could feel their suspicion and fear. These people had no reason to worry, he’d just tell them what they needed and they could finally help Nami.

“We need a doctor!” Luffy announced.

“Yeah, right!”

“As if we’d believe anything a Pirate has to say!”

“Just leave!” one man shouted, as he fired at them with his rifle.

Luffy heard the panicked yells below deck and the fear and anger spike from his *nakama*.

“You bastard!” Luffy immediately geared up for a fight.

The townsfolk prepared their weapons as well. This was going horribly wrong!

“Luffy-san, stop, please!” Vivi grabbed onto Luffy and didn’t let go. “They aren’t going to help us like this!”

Luffy turned to Vivi. She looked angry, but that wasn't what his Mystery Power was telling him.

Vivi then turned back to the townsfolk and bowed, her forehead pressed to the deck. She turned to look at Luffy out of the corner of her eye.

"You should bow too."

"Huh?"

"You have a lot to learn about being a Captain, Luffy-san." Vivi said just loud enough that only Luffy would hear. So Luffy copied Vivi and bowed.

Just then, Gaara burst out onto the deck, and his eyes looked furious. Sand was whirling around him. The people stiffened, and Gaara looked ready to attack. It really did look comical, seeing how Gaara waddled; but he was obviously out for blood.

"Someone fired a gun." Gaara stated. His eyes shifted towards the crowd. "My shield reacted."

"Gaara, stop." Luffy commanded, loud enough that the townsfolk would hear.

Gaara scowled from underneath his scarf.

"Gaara-san, you should bow too." Vivi suggested softly. Mostly because she was well-aware of how Gaara came across when he chose to threaten people.

Gaara paused for a moment and shifted awkwardly where he stood.

After a moment, he said, "...I can't bow."

That seemed to release some of the tension the locals held. Relieved that his senses weren't being throttled every which way, Luffy started speaking.

"My Navigator is sick-" Luffy was cut off with a coughing fit, and the cold, dry air probably didn't help things. Luffy pressed forward determinedly, even though he was wheezing a bit. "Our Navigator's really sick, and some of us have a cough. We need a Doctor. Please. I swear as a Captain that we won't do anything!"

Luffy pressed his forehead to the deck. His desperation was more than

obvious.

“Very well.” A man who looked rather imposing spoke up. He raised his hand, signaling to the others to call off the attack. He motioned, “Steer your ship to the dock in front of the green building.”

“Thank you! Thank you, so much!” Luffy looked so happy and relieved. “We have to get Nami ready to go!”

When the Village Leader saw the genuine reaction, he smiled, just a little.

Dalton, as he introduced himself, wasn’t sure what to think of the crew.

“If we get lost in the snow we might have to resort to eating each other to survive.”

“Gaara, no-one’s eating anybody!”

“Ah, you never know, Usopp-sweetie! Desperate times, and all that. Captain Donner’s crew is infamous for that reason. Even the Captain was eaten, you know.”

Usopp shivered. “That’s horrible...”

“Hypothermia would be such a way to go...it often causes you to strip.” Pudding blushed. “It would be humiliating to be caught out in your underwear...”

Usopp grumbled under his breath why she seemed so happy about that thought.

“I’ll warm you up with my love, Sweets-chan~!”

“Oh, Sanji-dear~”

Another member of their crew coughed, which sounded bad. Dalton didn’t have to be a Doctor to realize that.

“Zoro, you need to wear your jacket, seriously!” Usopp said. Since Nami was incapacitated, he had to be the voice of reason.

Zoro just glanced around, and seemed to think that wearing a T-shirt in this weather was fine.

“I can use this as training.”

“No! No training until you get better, Zoro-nii, ttebayou!”

Naruto opted for the best determined glare he could muster as he insistently held out Zoro’s coat.

Zoro winced and glared for a second before he scowled and accepted the jacket in defeat. “...Fine, damn brat.”

Usopp sighed in relief that Zoro at least listened to Naruto.

“WHOA~ (cough, cough) look at those huge mountains!” Luffy grinned. He was carrying Nami on his back, and didn’t really understand why (or care) that Sanji would rather she be carried “like a princess”. As long as Nami got the treatment she needed, it’d be fine.

As they walked, Dalton told them a bit about Drum and its history. Wapol forcing the people to beg him for medical treatment; picking and choosing who got treatment and who didn’t – which created resentment between the townsfolk and increasing their desperation. How he fled when the Blackbeard Pirates attacked, and left everyone to fend for themselves...

It was no wonder that the townsfolk were so defensive.

“We’ve recovered what we can over time, and we aren’t willing to give up what we’ve finally achieved.”

“Didn’t we meet a guy who was looking for Drum, earlier?” Usopp questioned.

“Yeah, we did.” Sanji said. “He tried eating our ship. Then the shitty brat here threw him off for several miles...”

“It was too cold to deal with his shit.” Gaara muttered.

Dalton gave a frown to the boy who was wrapped up in layers of clothing.

“Well...hopefully Wapol doesn’t find this place, again. If he does return, we’re prepared to fight him off.”

Dalton pointed to the tall mountains. “There’s one Doctor left on the island, Dr. Kureha, who many folks consider to be a witch. She comes down from her mountain on her own whims to check on the various towns’ residents.”

“We can’t just summon her or something?” Zoro asked, and Dalton

shook his head.

“There’s no real way to contact her, unless you can climb the Drum Rockies.”

The mountains looked easy to climb, or so Naruto assumed. How hard could it be?

Zoro coughed, which turned into a nasty fit. He wiped away the few specks of blood on his hand on his jacket. “There’s no guarantee that she’s coming here, then. We should just go to her.”

“Wow, who knew the Cactus-Brain could have a good idea?” Sanji quipped, and he grinned when Zoro glared at him.

“There’s no need for all of us to go,” Sanji reasoned. “So, Luffy, Nami, the Mossball and myself will go. The others can stay here if the Doctor comes and they can tell her we’re on the way. Easy.”

“I’ll go too.” Gaara stated. “I can carry Nami and everyone else with my sand. And we’ll have an easier time climbing the mountain with chakra. We can leave this frozen hell faster.”

“Less work for us, then.” Sanji said. “We need to treat Nami-swan’s ailment as quickly as possible.”

With that, they set off.

Dalton led Usopp, Vivi, Pudding, Naruto and Karoo to his house to wait for the time being.

They had barely settled down when one of the other townsfolk practically burst through the door.

“The-the Doctor!” he practically wheezed. “I just saw her leaving her castle! She’s headed towards Bighorn!”

Upon hearing that news, Usopp and Vivi decided that they would try to intercept the Doctor in Bighorn.

Naruto, Pudding and Karoo stayed behind just in case the Doctor passed through. If the Doctor was heading elsewhere, then one of them could ride Karoo to intercept her.

They borrowed a map and a sled from one of the townsfolk. Unfortunately for them, the Doctor was swift in her visits, because by the time they reached Bighorn, they were told she was heading

towards Gyasta next.

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As their group trudged through the snow, Luffy and his group encountered several giant rabbits called Lapahns. They mostly ignored them, since it was more vital in getting to the castle. Gaara kept a tight grip on Zoro, not letting him fight or wander off unwittingly.

One oversized rabbit charged at them, only to be intercepted by a wall of sand. Of course, the Pirates still didn't pay any attention to the rabbits.

After several more passes, the four members who could actually move finally got tired of the Lapahns.

"Cut it out!"

Luffy punched a Lapahn; Sanji kicked one; Zoro grabbed one and slammed it to the ground; and Gaara grabbed one in his sand and threw it into a tree.

After that, they continued their trek.

"Oi..." Zoro pointed to a large group of Lapahns further up the mountain. "What're they doing?"

The creatures began jumping, which shook the ground. The Pirates could feel the impacts even from where they stood some miles away.

"They wouldn't...seriously?" Sanji wondered aloud. "Are they trying to cause an avalanche?"

"...This is probably where we all get buried alive and slowly freeze to death." Gaara muttered bitterly.

The snow further up the mountain slowly began falling; and building up slowly. Within minutes, a wall of snow was billowing towards them.

"Get behind me!" Gaara ordered as he formed a large sphere of sand around their group. Gaara held his hands out, as a protective measure to keep the sand up. He winced a little as the snow slammed into his shield and impacted around them.

Once the roaring stopped, Gaara then swirled and pushed his sand out, clearing their way.

“...Shit...” Sanji breathed. He didn’t want to think of all the ways things could have gone wrong if Gaara hadn’t been there. “That was *too* close. I think Gaara spoils us with his sand shield.”

Luffy praised Gaara as well, thinking it was the coolest thing.

Gaara was thankful that his blush was hidden. “O-of course.”

Luffy though, grinned at Gaara’s elated feelings.

They neared the base of the mountain, when they passed a baby Lapahn desperately trying to dig its parents out of the snow. They probably were caught in their own attack. The baby snarled at them, trying to defend its trapped parents. Luffy said nothing as he simply stepped forward and pulled the parents out.

With that, Luffy motioned. “Let’s go. We’re almost there.”

He coughed again, and wiped his mouth. It almost hurt to breathe right now due to the air getting thinner.

They finally reached the base of the mountain, and Luffy transferred Nami to Gaara, who made a makeshift basket with his sand to carry her. Since Gaara didn’t want to remove his gloves and shoes no matter how much he detested wearing them, he just formed more of his sand into claws. Gaara then wrapped the others in his sand and began climbing the side of the mountain with his makeshift claws that he stuck into the rock face.

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The climb was tiring, and it was getting miserably cold. Wind and snow whipped around them. Gaara released a few Seals on him that weighed him down, making things much easier, but still. His clothes were slowly becoming soaked, defeating the purpose of keeping him warm.

Gaara pressed forward, and almost slipped at one point when his sand claw didn’t penetrate the thick layers of ice. Luffy reached out with both hands, and was able to grip the ledge; and Gaara wrapped more sand around Luffy to strengthen his hold. Gaara let go of his hold on the mountain, and they shot upwards.

Both Sanji and Zoro were in agreement that rocketing upwards and then falling so close to a cliff’s edge wasn’t anywhere near fun. At least Gaara’s sand was at the rescue once again. Maybe Sanji was

right: Gaara's variety of uses for his sand had spoiled them.

Their group practically collapsed once they reached the top.

"It's too cold. I hate it here. I can't feel my face." Gaara complained under his breath. "My nose, fingers and toes are probably going to all fall off."

Zoro wheezed a bit. "We're almost there, sand-brat."

Sanji then took Nami, and carried her the way he believed she deserved to be carried: bridal style. They slowly made their way through the thick snow that was nearly twenty feet above their heads. They stumbled through the snow onto a shoveled path, terrifying a creature of some kind. It was difficult to make out what it was in the dark and falling snow.

Luffy let out a harsh sounding cough. He could sense curiosity, but mostly fear coming from the creature. "Please, help my *nakama!*"

The creature turned and started walking away, looking nervous. It briefly looked back at them, as if expecting them to follow. The creature seemed to shift and grow in height, but it was difficult to tell.

They were led to the castle, and once in the torchlight, they could see that the creature was a reindeer wearing a hat. The deer led them into the open doors of the castle. It didn't seem that the witch cared that the main entrance was chilly and was covered in a carpet of snow.

"Chopper? What's going on?" an old woman called as she leaned over a railing a few floors up.

Luffy quickly bowed, and ignored his raking cough. "Please, save my *nakama!* Nami's really sick!"

The old woman arched her brow when even Zoro let out a harsh cough.

"Alright, Chopper. Take 'em to the south wing."

The reindeer led them to a small room that had a few beds, and was warm.

Taking off their coats, and Gaara was more than thankful to strip off all the layers. Since they weren't sick, the woman had Gaara and Sanji hang everyone's clothes by a large fireplace so they could dry.

The old woman introduced herself as Dr. Kureha.

“Chopper, take care of the girl. You boys who are sick, come with me.”

Kureha ordered Sanji and Gaara to go to another room so that they wouldn't get in the way.

Gaara glowered at her, and Kureha wouldn't budge. She'd been in this world for far too long to be intimidated by children; no matter how much they pouted and glared.

“What're you staring at, boy? Wondering about the secret of my youth?”

“What're you talking about? You're *old*.” Gaara said bluntly.

His eyes widened when Kureha threw an axe at him. His sand blocked it, of course.

“Oh, my. My apologies,” Kureha said through her teeth, not sounding sorry at all. “I get so worked up sometimes. Good thing you have that sand, otherwise, I would have had another patient.”

Gaara quickly retreated to the room he and Sanji were ordered to go to, deciding that old ladies were scary.

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When Kureha heard that the pair had breathed in wax flakes, she was mildly amused.

“That's certainly something you don't hear every day.” Kureha cackled, “Luckily for you two, all you need is a lung flush. Simple enough procedure.”

Kureha frowned when Zoro tried to insist that he didn't need to be put under anesthesia. Kureha slapped Zoro across his head. She couldn't care less about the glare Zoro sent her way, creepy silver eyes or not. He was about as intimidating as a Lapahn kit.

“Of course you need it, you dolt!” Kureha huffed. “These young people insisting that they're so tough!”

After taking care of the boys, Chopper approached her because Nami needed some extra care. Wax flakes and kestia on top of that. The girl was extremely lucky.

After they were done treating Nami, Luffy, and Zoro; Kureha had them all put in the same room to make observation easier. She also had a few patient files to go through, so Chopper was put in charge of their care.

When Chopper entered the room, he was shocked to see both Sanji and Gaara there. How they managed to sneak in, he wasn't sure. Both seemed to be asleep.

Oh, well. He could just ignore these Humans and get on with his task. He checked Nami's vitals, and then moved on to the other two.

Nami slowly opened her eyes, and glanced around. For a moment, she was confused. She probably would have panicked if she hadn't spotted Gaara's red hair – or saw Sanji with his head buried in his arms at the foot of her bed.

Nami then spotted the small reindeer.

"Oh, hello..." Nami croaked a little. She felt really thirsty. Still stiff and tired, but she could actually breathe without any effort now.

Chopper yelped, and tried and failed to hide behind the doorway.

Just then, Gaara opened his eyes from meditating, and he scowled at Nami when he noticed she was awake.

"Everyone was worried about you. We had to come to this miserably cold place. Don't get sick again."

"Aw, were you worried about me, Gaara-kun?" Nami teased as she ruffled his hair.

"No!" Gaara denied, stubbornly crossing his arms and not looking at her. He didn't pull away, either. "It was just...inconvenient, that's all."

"Sorry to worry you." Nami chuckled.

Nami then turned her attention to the reindeer-tanuki creature.

"Are you the one who helped me? Thank you!"

Gaara then turned his attention to Chopper, and his eyes widened. He hadn't seen the creature walking around, since he and Sanji had to sneak through the castle to avoid the terrifying old woman. He'd been

talking to Shukaku as well, and had been invested in the conversation for hours.

“I...I only helped you because it was my job, that’s all! I hate Humans, just so you know.”

“Is that right?” Nami said. “You did a really good job, then. I feel better already!”

“Asshole!” Chopper danced a little as he giggled. “Bitch! Don’t think your comments make me happy! I’m not!”

“I’m Nami, this is Gaara. That’s Sanji. Over there is my Captain, Luffy – and the snoring guy at the end is Zoro, Gaara’s brother. What’s your name?”

“...I’m Chopper. Toni-Toni Chopper. So...you need to hurry up and leave, and...”

Chopper trailed off when Gaara approached him.

Gaara was looking at him with wide-eyed wonderment.

“What-what do you want, Human?!”

Gaara suddenly grabbed Chopper, and ignored his protests and demands. “Let me go! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“So fluffy!” Gaara hugged Chopper tightly. “You’re so fluffy I could *die!*”

“Let go of me!” Chopper managed to squirm away. “Don’t touch me, Human!”

Due to the noise, the rest of the crew woke up.

Sanji fawned over Nami, while Luffy complained of being hungry. Zoro took one look at the ensuing chaos, and muttered about all the stupid noise and went back to sleep.

Luffy noticed Chopper and yelled, “FOOD!”

Chopper screamed and ran for his life, with Luffy in pursuit.

“NO!” Gaara protested as he took off after them. “He’s not food, Captain! He’s a cuddle-buddy!”

Nami watched them leave and smiled. “Things are getting back to normal, ne, Sanji-kun?”

“That it is, Nami-swan.” Sanji agreed, and he wished he could light up a cigarette. Kureha had threatened him with experimental surgery if he so much as pulled out a cigarette and looked at it.

Without prompting, he got Nami a drink of water. Nami appreciated that Sanji payed attention to this sort of thing.

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Wapol and his crew recognized Drum Island easily enough.

“Finally, we’re home.” Wapol smirked. “Time to reclaim my title and my throne.”

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Meanwhile, Chopper was fleeing for his very life from a couple of crazy people.

“Give me food!” Luffy demanded.

“I’m not food!” Chopper yelled back. “I’m a reindeer!”

Chopper let out a scream when Gaara suddenly tackled him from above. What the hell, had he actually *jumped* from one of the upper floors?! “Fluffy cuddle-buddy! Captain, I want to keep him!”

“Of course!” Luffy finally slowed down as he approached them. “Do you know where the food is? I’m starving!”

“Let me go!” Chopper roared as he grew in size. “I’m not going anywhere with you Humans!”

Gaara still hadn’t let go of him; if anything, Gaara’s hold tightened even more as he buried his face into the fluff on the back of Chopper’s neck. “*Giant* fluffy cuddle-buddy! This is the best!”

“Get off of me!” Chopper yelled, to no avail.

“No!” Luffy now hugged Chopper, wrapping his arms around the reindeer and Gaara several times. “Not until you tell us where the food is!”

Chopper thought that these people were insane.

Kureha went to see her patients, and frowned in clear disapproval that one patient was missing and was currently running around the castle when he should've been resting; and the two people who weren't supposed to be in there had snuck in at some point. Gaara had left behind his gourd, so she knew he had been there. Sanji at least looked a little guilty.

She ended up telling the Pirates about Chopper when they asked about him. That also brought about mentioning Dr. Hiriluk. What a foolish man he'd been; with an even more foolish dream. If he could see Chopper today...he'd be proud, and so insistent that he leave on some grand adventure.

"Thanks for treating us," Nami said. "When can we go? We have someplace we need to be."

"Feh, you can't go for at least another week!" Kureha huffed. "Three of you are still recovering from those issues with your lungs, and you still require some observation after recovering from kestia."

"...So..." Nami looked scheming. "What if we were to take your assistant with us?"

"What, you want to strand an old woman on top of this mountain without her assistant?"

Just then, Chopper, Gaara, and Luffy burst into the room, and practically barreled into Zoro.

Zoro began yelling and cursing at them, and threatening them with bodily injury.

"I'm gonna kick all of your asses!" Zoro yelled, and Chopper screeched.

"Zoro-nii! We're keeping him!" Gaara announced as he held onto a squirming Chopper.

"No! No!" Chopper protested.

"He's going to lead us to food!" Luffy said excitedly.

"I never said that!"

"You're disrupting the patients' rest!" Kureha scolded. "And you..."

Kureha loomed over Luffy, “You should be resting!”

Luffy yelped and started to run away, though he looked a little too happy about it.

“Luffy, Gaara, cut it out!” Nami ordered.

Both Luffy and Gaara quickly turned to her, and Chopper wriggled away from Gaara’s hold, and hid the corner of his face behind Kureha’s leg.

“Well, it seems that Gaara-kun has spoken, we’re keeping you, Chopper!” Nami announced, and both Luffy and Gaara especially, lit up.

“I’m-*you’re what?!* ” Chopper demanded.

“I never said that.” Kureha replied harshly.

“Well...” Nami smirked at Kureha. “We still need to have some medical observation according to the good Doctor Kureha, and we don’t have time to sit around for a week. So it makes sense for Chopper to come along, doesn’t it?”

“I can’t believe you’re trying to steal my assistant,” Kureha huffed irritably. “What nerve! I won’t share the secret of my youth with you.”

“...But you’re already really old, you don’t need him.” Gaara reasoned. “Besides, when you die, the cold will just preserve your body very nicely.”

Kureha stared at Gaara, while Nami looked between her and the boy, hissing admonishments. She let out a cackle, the cheeky nerve of this kid!

“Doctorine, tell them I don’t wanna go!” Chopper begged.

Kureha simply smirked at them. “Check their vitals, will you, Chopper? These idiots got themselves so worked up. I have other things to take care of.”

Chopper obeyed, and eyed Gaara and Luffy with suspicion.

“Soooo...” Luffy said far too casually, “Come with us! I like you.”

“No...” Chopper stubbornly refused. But then, he asked, “Are you really Pirates?”

“Yep!” Luffy nodded. “Nami is my Navigator,”

“Don’t forget Thief,” Nami interjected with a wink.

Luffy nodded in agreement and continued.

“Zoro is my Swordsman; Sanji is my cook; Gaara has all this awesome Mystery Sand and a Mystery Person; and I’m the Captain! I’m gonna be the Pirate King.”

“R-really?” Chopper turned to Luffy. “Have you...have seen amazing islands? Met new people?”

“We saw Giants at the last island.” Luffy grinned. “And there were dinosaurs and giant bugs, too!”

Chopper was elated, hearing their stories.

Zoro and Gaara it seemed, had traveled quite a bit, and had interesting stories as well. Chopper wanted to join them, except...

“I can’t go...”

“Aww, why not?” Luffy pouted.

“You’re coming with us.” Gaara stated, almost making it sound like a threat.

Nami was the one to give Gaara’s shoulder a slight push, silently telling him to not threaten people.

“I’m a monster.” Chopper said. That was reason enough. No-one wanted a monster on their crew.

“You aren’t a monster.” Gaara immediately disagreed. “I know, because I’ve been called a monster, too. Zoro-nii, my other brother, Naruto, and my *nakama*, I’m not a monster to them.”

Chopper looked at Gaara, wondering how anyone could consider the Human boy to be a monster. Sure, he had those strange eyes, and a smell sort of *like* an animal yet *not* – there was a scent of sand and blood – but yet – there wasn’t even a hint of a threat.

“You should come with us. It’ll be great; you won’t have to put up with all this stupid snow.”

Just then, Luffy jolted and he scowled. He was uncharacteristically

serious. “Remember that guy who tried to eat our ship? He’s outside.”

The scent of a threat wafted off of Gaara just then, as he looked furious. “That bastard ate Merry’s railing. I spent *hours* carving patterns into her railing and Usopp polished it. And he *ruined* it.”

Chopper and the others ran outside, with Gaara debating whether or not he would wear his layers of clothing. He could hardly move with the clothing on, so with a heavy, put-upon sigh he braved the frigid weather. He still wore his gloves and shoes, at least.

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Kureha glared at Wapol as he marched through the castle gates as if he owned the place. He’d forsaken any right to it when he abandoned his people. They watched as he consumed various objects, and Chopper gasped when Wapol went for the doors.

“The birds!” Chopper went to save the defenseless creatures.

“That guy!” Luffy fumed.

“We can take ‘em,” Zoro said.

Kureha whacked both of them, hitting pressure points that caused both of them to crumble to their knees. “You can’t fight, you idiots!”

Kureha scolded both of them. “Seriously, you’ll do more damage to your bodies if you don’t rest! You aren’t fighting!”

“But...but...” Luffy tried to argue.

Kureha thrust her thumb towards Sanji and Gaara. “You’ve got two *uninjured* perfectly healthy crewmembers.” She turned towards them. “You can fight, right?”

Sanji nearly lit a cigarette. He tapped the floor with his toe. “Of course.”

“Yes, I can.” Gaara said with a creepy grin.

“I wanna fight too...” Luffy bemoaned, as he pressed himself up against the railing like he was in prison. This wasn’t fair!

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One of the men burst into Dalton’s house. “Sir! We have—an

emergency!”

“Stay here,” Dalton ordered the Pirates as he followed his subordinate.

Pudding glanced outside, and frowned. Dalton, and the rest of the villagers looked concerned about something. They hurried off as a group.

“Something’s going on,” Pudding said, “obviously. Their cute, little, panicked faces make it look really bad.”

She glanced over at Naruto. “So, Naruto-sweetie, do you feel like staying here, twiddling your thumbs, or do you want to have fun?”

Naruto was on his feet in seconds. “Have fun, ‘ttebayou!”

Pudding pulled on her jacket. “Let’s go, then.”

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Wapol and three of his cronies used the soldiers as a means of distraction. Dalton tried fighting Wapol off, but it was fruitless. Wapol continued to eat the villager’s houses, and Dalton was powerless to stop him. Dalton was thankful that people ran out of their houses, and weren’t consumed by Wapol. Though seeing their fear; watching as the lives they had built up being torn apart around them – Dalton was furious.

A true King didn’t disrupt his citizens’ lives like this!

Wapol continued on his way toward the Drum Rockies as if it were nothing that he had essentially torn apart an entire village for his own gain. Not like it was a surprise.

“Wapol!” Dalton yelled as he charged at the former King.

There was the sound of a gunshot, and a scream. Dalton felt something hot tear through him – he gasped and fell to his knee. He forced himself to stand up again.

“**WAPOL!!**” Dalton snarled. No matter what, he wouldn’t – *couldn’t* give in. He charged forward. Dalton’s advance was halted when a second shot rang out. He fell forward, then. The white snow underneath him was slowly becoming red. He watched as Wapol, Chess, Kuromarimo, and Condor; along with a few more of his cronies continued on their way, hating that he couldn’t move.

He forced himself up again. He wouldn't give in here!

Dalton tried to fight the men off, but he was injured and severely outnumbered. One man raised his gun towards Dalton's head and pulled back the hammer. Dalton glared defiantly. He wouldn't offer the satisfaction of begging for his life.

"Oh, my...what have we here?" Pudding's voice spoke up, giving everyone present pause. Dalton stared. Hadn't he told her and the boy to stay back at his house? "Oh-what have I been missing out on? Is that blood? I'm a little jealous of your position, Dalton-san, mind if I join you?"

Pudding slowly walked towards them, her magenta pink jacket stood out amongst the snow and darker colors the townsfolk and soldiers wore.

"So many handsome men, I'm outnumbered and that means you could take advantage of me..." Pudding shook her head. She hugged herself with a sigh, and winked. Blush colored her cheeks. "My innocence could be ripped away so easily...please, be gentle."

"What?" the soldiers questioned. They all glanced at each other, not knowing what to make of the situation.

Something burst out of the snow, and screams suddenly followed as Naruto ripped through the men, spinning with Hayabusa. Sure, rifles were cut, along with several fingers. But at least no-one lost any limbs! That was a victory, in Naruto's opinion.

"Red snow makes me think of cherry snow cones." Pudding smiled as she drew her knives with a flick of her wrists. "I wonder what sort of recipes you'll inspire in me?"

"F-fire!" one of the men shouted, and his men aimed their guns and fired.

Pudding charged towards a soldier, and ducked forward into a flip. Her leg shot over her head, kicking the gun to the ground. Continuing with her forward momentum, she sliced his leg easily, and straightened. He fell to the ground, as his leg could no longer support his weight.

"You certainly move fast for a first date," Pudding smiled as she glanced down at her slightly bloody shoulder. She broke his dropped rifle with a fierce, Haki-powered kick. "I'm flattered, really. We can

get more personal with each other, then.”

Pudding whirled out of the way as she sliced an oncoming soldier's fingers. “Ladyfingers? Tiramisu? I’m getting hungry just thinking about it.”

Another soldier charged at her, and yelled as he brought his now useless rifle down as a club. He struck Pudding across the back. The sound of its impact made even the villagers watching wince – because of how painful it looked and sounded.

“Oh!” Pudding cried out.

Pudding slowly turned towards the man, and he leaned away with a wide-eyed expression of fear. Pudding had a smile and blush darkened across her cheeks. “How fun! I’m going to have a bruise from that, most certainly.” Pudding closed the distance between herself and the soldier in seconds, and reached out as she grabbed his collar. “That was *elating*~.”

Another soldier who had lost the use of his rifle thanks to Naruto, tried to sneak up behind her. He figured he could use her as a hostage against the boy and he could save his comrades. Instead, Pudding smashed the knee of the soldier she was holding onto with a kick. Then whirled around, now wielding two knives.

The man yelled out in pain as Pudding stabbed his shoulders, and sliced the knives down the entire length of his arms.

Pudding looked far too overjoyed to be normal as she sliced her way through Wapol’s soldiers.

“You men have such big guns but no idea how to properly use them... color me disappointed,” Pudding lamented as the last of the soldiers fell.

“They seem to be using them just fine?” Naruto said as he walked up to her. “They just aren’t very good shots.”

“You’re so cute, Naruto-sweetie. Ah, such innocent youth.” Pudding patted Naruto’s head, confusing him even more.

The townsfolk stared at the two Pirates, who easily dispatched the soldiers.

Pudding unzipped the soldiers’ coats, and sliced the ends into ribbons.

She then hogtied the men and looked pleased with herself. She knew how to improvise.

“Well then,” Pudding turned her attention to the villagers. “That was disappointingly easy.”

“Yeah, not even a challenge for Hayabusa...” Naruto sighed. At least the kusarigama was somewhat listening to him, now. But he still had to think of a way to dual-wield his kusarigama, dammit, ‘ttebayou!

“Dalton-sama!” one of the villagers yelled.

Dalton could feel himself fading. He cursed that he had failed here. That he had failed his people.

“We need to get the Doctor!”

“There’s no time!”

“Well not if we’re standing around arguing!”

“Excuse us...” several people slowly approached them. The Doctors slowly approached the villagers.

“You...what do *you* want?” one of the men asked venomously. The Ishii-20 had left them desperate long before they abandoned them.

“We can help!” another of the Doctors said, raising his hands in a show of peace.

Another Doctor spoke up, “Please, let us help him!”

The villagers hesitantly stepped back, but one villager said, “If you kill him...” he raised his gun meaningfully.

The Doctors understood, and felt that response was more than warranted. The Doctors worked quickly, and within minutes, Dalton’s breathing was stable.

“It was thanks to that Quack Doctor, back then.” One of the Doctors removed his mask. “His courage and sacrifice...it meant more than you could ever know.”

“That it did,” another Doctor agreed. “Wapol threatened us, and we’d lived under his thumb for so long...but not anymore.”

One Doctor took off his glasses and cleaned them. “We won’t have to

worry about him – not that much, anyway. Not anymore.”

“What’re you talking about?” a woman asked.

“We fought back the only way we could,” was the cryptic reply.

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Wapol and his men trudged through the snow. Robson yawned lazily and smacked his lips. The hippo would much rather be sleeping. The hippo anticipated resting once they reached their destination.

Several Lapahn intercepted them.

“Take care of those things,” Wapol told his remaining soldiers, using them as the perfect distraction so that he, Chess, Condor, and Kuromarimo could go around.

The soldiers stared at the Lapahns with some trepidation. Well...they had guns. How hard would it be to dispatch some oversized rabbits?

One of the men fired his gun, and the Lapahn easily dodged it. Then it charged, bounding towards them, zigzagging as it went. Another man fired, and he saw how the Lapahn’s white fur turned red. Instead of acting like it was injured, the Lapahn instead became even more enraged. Lapahns began leaping from the trees, snarling.

One man lost his arm, and another had his throat ripped out.

“Run away! Run away!” yelled their leader, because this was utterly hopeless. No-one protested his decision.

Their guns hardly did anything! Aggressive Lapahns were one thing; *enraged*, aggressive Lapahns were another.

It was a tactical retreat, of course. Nothing more.

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Wapol huffed as he felt short of breath, for some reason. His arms were feeling oddly numb. He was tired, and he wanted to take a well-deserved nap in his old room. The thought was just a small part of what motivated him to keep going; even though he was sorely tempted to lay down and sleep right there where he stood in the snow.

Approaching his castle, Wapol took in the sight of the front door being wide open, letting in all the snow.

“Why are these doors open?” Wapol complained upon reaching his castle. “Whatever bastard’s living here is making a mess of my castle.”

There was a shoveled pathway, though why someone would purposefully not close the doors was beyond him. His eyes narrowed at the *Pirate* flag that rippled in the wind on a flagpole of the castle.

Without a second thought, Wapol took aim and shot the flag down.

“Stop! Don’t!” Someone from inside the castle shouted just as he’d fired.

He smirked when it fell. Wapol let out a harsh cough. He didn’t think much of it; since he could be taken care of later. He better not be getting sick, though. He *shouldn’t* be sick. Now onto –

Chopper stared in horror as Hiriluk’s flag fell.

“Huh...?” It took Wapol a moment. Then he realized. A cruel smile was on his face as he laughed, “You’re that freakish creature who tried attacking us after that stupid, Quack Doctor killed himself! What a joke!”

Chopper growled at them. How dare he speak of Hiriluk like that! How dare he shoot down his flag! Charging forward, Chopper went to punch Wapol, except Condor intercepted him.

Chopper cried out as he was struck with a series of sharp, rapid kicks.

“What a stupid beast!” Wapol laughed cruelly. He fired his cannon at Chopper, sending him rolling several feet.

“You-you should just leave!” yelled Chopper, shakily standing to his feet. Chopper was determined to protect his home and Kureha. He charged again, and once again Condor tried kicking him – except this time, Chopper shrunk down so that the hits went over his head. Chopper shifted to his large form as he reached Wapol. Chopper grabbed his collar in a tight fist. “This country doesn’t need you!”

Wapol stared at him, taken aback.

“I...” Chopper held back his fist, shaking. He was so angry, yet... Wapol looked so cowardly, and so pathetic. It wouldn’t be worth hitting him. “I won’t hit you, so leave this country!”

“Chopper!” Kureha called out. “He’s not going to listen to you!”

Chopper turned towards Kureha. “But...”

Wapol smirked at the stupid beast for looking away. He aimed his cannon.

“Oi, don’t take your eyes off your opponent!” Zoro yelled a warning from where he stood on the upper floor, but it came too late.

Chopper hardly had time to react as he was shot by Wapol. He was sent flying back.

“OI!! What the *hell* do you think you’re *doing*?!”

“Huh?” Wapol and his men glanced up, and his eyes widened in shock. The flag was back! Someone was *daring* to defy him?!

“You fly a fake flag, right?” Luffy asked from his place on the roof. He ignored Kureha’s yelling at him about his not doing stupid and risky things because he was still recovering. He had managed to save Chopper’s flag, and tied it back to its proper place by using the sleeve of his jacket.

Luffy narrowed his eyes dangerously. “You have *no idea* what this Pirate flag means because you were fake Pirates who didn’t even risk your lives!”

“What that flag means?” Wapol questioned. It was just a stupid flag, nothing more. What was the big deal? He laughed mockingly, “Stupid Pirate flags have no meaning!”

“That’s why you’re hopeless!” Luffy shot back. This guy was such an idiot for not getting a simple concept. “A Pirate flag isn’t something you can raise as a joke!”

Wapol rolled his eyes. “You idiot! If it weren’t for a joke, there’s no way *I*, the King, would raise it!” Wapol slashed his hand through the air, emphasizing his point. What was so difficult to understand about this?! “You have no right to put that stupid flag back up when I take it down!”

Wapol took aim and fired again. Luffy simply grinned. “You can’t break this flag!”

Wapol sneered when the cannonball exploded. Spreading out his arms and laughing madly, he declared haughtily, “He must’ve been blown away! Such an idiot!”

He went into a hacking cough again. Taking in a few breaths, his smirk was back.

Though his gleeful smile fell when there was...sand? A large sphere of sand was protecting the flag.

“What?!” Wapol demanded.

“See? What did I tell you?” Luffy asked, as the sand fell away. There was a kid standing *sideways* on the castle glaring at him. All the sand gathered into a gourd on his back.

The kid was practically holding back a snarl. “I won’t let you hit my Captain.”

“How is that possible?” Condor asked, giving a flap of his wings. Wasn’t it Crocodile that had the Sand Devil Fruit? Perhaps the ability to stand on walls was a Devil Fruit, but how? No-one could eat *two* Devil Fruit!

“I don’t know who the heck this Pirate flag belongs to,” Luffy said, “but since this flag is a person’s pledge to risk his life, it’s *not* raised as a joke!”

Luffy now glared, and an energy of some kind crashed down on the cowardly King and his men.

“This flag isn’t something you can just break while laughing foolishly!” Luffy looked every bit like the Captain he was as he declared, “You can’t come and go as you please when it suits you. The life of a Pirate is one of pride, you commit your *all* to it! This flag, it represents that commitment! You can *never* destroy it!”

There was a warning and a firm command housed within that strange energy: ***run away.***

Unfortunately, Wapol was far too foolish and had too much stubborn pride to run. Even though his senses whispered at him to run, he thought that it was just a fluke of some kind. There was no way these Pirates could do anything to him. His men seemed hesitant, but they stayed because he did.

Wapol was starving, and he figured he could just hit two birds with one stone by eating the doors. He would have more armor as well. Wapol casually ate one of the doors with a few loud chomps, then turned to the second one.

“Don’t...” Chopper panted. The snowbird chicks were on that door, and he needed to keep them safe. He was in his larger form, nearly pleading. “Don’t touch the door!”

Horried upon seeing that Wapol had no intention to listen to him, Chopper charged forward to shove Wapol away from the door.

Luffy was fully intending to fight, except Kureha threatened him with an axe. She had absolutely no intention of letting him overexert himself – and while she appreciated it, his stunt with the flag had her threatening a month’s bedrest. Not even Zoro was spared, since Kureha kicked him in the side and demanded that he not fight either.

Pouting, Luffy relented.

“Gaara! Show that bastard what it means to be a *real* Pirate!” Luffy did glare, looking surprisingly outraged. “Oh, and Gaara. You can take an arm and a leg.”

Gaara slipped his goggles up and he grinned. “Thank you, Captain.”

Wapol opened his mouth to bite the door when, a person surrounded by sand bodily crashed into him. Chopper skidded to a stop in shock. What just happened?

Gaara grinned madly. “I’ll pay you back properly for eating Merry’s railing.”

“What? What?! How dare you hit me! I’m the King of this country!” Wapol yelled as he shifted his cannon into a machine gun.

Gaara’s shield easily caught all of the bullets, and Wapol was left wondering what was with that sand? Gaara went through a series of spins to build up momentum as he formed a giant hand.

There was something in Wapol’s attitude that rubbed Shukaku the wrong way. He couldn’t exactly pinpoint what it was, or why he should even care. But a self-glorified, selfish, traitorous King who abandoned his people had no right to a throne.

“I don’t give a fuck who you are!” Gaara replied, as his sand slowly expanded around him. His creepy smile unnerved Wapol, but he wouldn’t be the one to admit it.

Gaara happened to glance over at Chopper’s fight with Kuromarimo and Chess – only to see a ball of fluff.

“He’s even *fluffier*.” Gaara sighed happily. He wanted to bury his face into Chopper’s fur *even more*, now.

Wapol tried to use the distraction to hit Gaara; but of course, his sand protected him. Gaara sighed wistfully, wishing he could watch Chopper’s fight. Alas, Luffy had given him orders.

Wapol sneered as a cannon shot out of his mouth. Since he couldn’t seem to hit the kid, he’d go for something else! He took aim, and then veered to the side at the last minute and fired.

Gaara turned wide-eyed. “Captain! Zoro-nii! Doctor!”

There was an explosion, and for several tense minutes – Gaara wondered if...

He couldn’t see anything through the haze.

“We’re okay!” Luffy called out.

Over with Luffy and the others, Kureha stared at Zoro in surprise. Zoro breathed heavier than normal, as he caught his breath. Ghosting hadn’t been that difficult, before. But transporting himself and two other people...

“That’s an interesting ability...” Kureha observed quietly, to which Zoro shrugged.

Relieved, Gaara slowly turned back to Wapol – and with a murderous glare on his face, the traitorous King recoiled.

“You ate Merry’s railing and tried to kill my Captain and brother.” Sandy tendrils surrounded Gaara, who was looking increasingly menacing. Gaara charged forward, and shot out his sand in a fierce arch.

Gaara struck Wapol, who went flying back. Wapol hit the ground and rolled several times before stopping. Wapol groaned as he pushed himself up. He felt that a few things were broken, he went to eat a few large boulders, when he was pelted by sand.

“*Sand Shuriken!*”

Wapol put his arms up in a defensive position, and he hissed at how the attacks *hurt* when they made contact with his exposed skin. Why was he feeling the attacks like this?

Opening his mouth wide, he consumed several of the sand projectiles. This was too easy, Wapol thought. He was certain he could work with this and beat this kid. He'd then have him thrown in the dungeon for defying him!

Wapol stood up before he let out a hacking cough that convulsed through his entire body. Another fierce cough and Wapol spat up blood. What?

Wapol stared shakily at the blood in the snow. Was that his? No...no way. That *couldn't* be his! His vision started getting blurry. He fell forward, barely catching himself.

"W-what did you do?!" Wapol demanded, near panicking. He was *sick!* He *couldn't* be sick! Wapol *was not supposed to be sick!* That was why he had all those Doctors! They were *supposed* to prevent this sort of thing!

Gaara cocked his head. "Nothing, really. My sand has poison in it, some of which you ate."

"You *poisoned* me?!!" Wapol snarled as he forced himself to his feet. "I-I won't accept this! I'll have you arrested then executed!"

"You tried to kill my family and the Doctor."

He had to get back to the Doctors! They could fix this! Then he'd be back, and he wouldn't lose next time! This castle was rightfully his! All of them, the monster, the witch, the Pirates! He'd have them all arrested and publically gunned down! He'd leave their corpses up as a display that warned of what happened to those who defied him!

His breathing was becoming more sporadic.

"Please, spare me!" Wapol started begging desperately. "I-I'll make you second King! How's that sound? J-just...get the Doctors! Let me--!"

Wapol descended into a series of fierce coughs that nearly made him pass out because he couldn't take in a breath.

He just had to try and trick the boy! Who *wouldn't* want an entire country? Surely, this kid could be manipulated into betraying those Pirates and serving under him?

"I thought you were going to execute me?"

Gaara was closer, now. Wapol felt more fear than he ever thought was possible.

Wapol gripped his arm when a sudden tightness shot through it. His chest began to hurt and it was getting increasingly difficult to breathe. Why was he having such a hard time? He had always been able to breathe easily up here.

“My Captain is the only King I’ll serve.” Gaara stated coldly as sand slowly climbed up Wapol’s limbs.

“Get away from me!” Wapol cried. “You monster!”

Wapol tried to thrash the sand away, but it was no use. Gaara clenched his fist, crushing an arm and a leg that were still converted into metal.

Wapol collapsed as a thick, painful haze came over him.

He passed out in the snow, and was unable to enter his castle.

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“I’ll take you both down in three minutes!” Chopper declared to Kuromarimo and Chess as he took out a small pill. “*Rumble Ball!*”

The pair of course didn’t think the small reindeer could do much. It was two against one!

“What can you do to us in three minutes?!” Chess questioned mockingly.

“Three minutes?” Luffy practically beamed. “That’s amazing!”

Chopper bit down on his *Rumble Ball*, and transformed into *Walk Point*.

“You’re just another Devil Fruit user.” Kuromarimo stated, pulling out his bow.

“You’re a Zoan-Type,” Chess added. “We’ve seen all your forms, so there’s nothing more you can do!”

Chopper dodged several fiery arrows from Kuromarimo; and transformed into *Heavy Point*.

“I’m a Human Reindeer!” Chopper shot back.

Chess prepared his hammers to strike Chopper down. Chopper easily dodged Chess' hammers as he shifted into *Jumping Point* next; and leapt several feet high into the air.

"Look at how high he can jump!" Luffy was practically yanking on Zoro's arm. "Are you seeing that, Zoro?!"

"Yeah," Zoro huffed in disappointment. "I wanna fight, too..."

Unfortunately, though...Kureha had a threatening eye on both of them. And well, there didn't seem to be a Swordsman among them.

"What's that form?" Chess asked.

"Impossible!" Kuromarimo said. "There's no way a Zoan could have that many!"

Chess charged forward and used Kuromarimo as a boost to hit Chopper with a hammer.

"Guard Point! Fur Boost!"

Chopper shifted into a fluffy ball that absorbed the impact of the hammer, and he simply bounced away.

"He's so cool!" Luffy whooped.

"Another form?!" Kuromarimo asked. That was impossible! "Zoan-types only have *three* forms! What the heck are you?"

"The *Rumble Ball* is a drug that messes with the wavelengths of the Devil Fruit's normal transformations," Chopper explained. It had taken him five years' worth of research to find four more transformation points.

"He has *seven* forms?" Chess questioned uneasily.

Kuromarimo took aim and fired, though Chopper easily dodged it by twisting out of the way in a different form.

"He has *seven forms!*" Luffy nearly passed out in his excitement as he clung to Zoro.

"Stop pulling on me!" Zoro demanded as he pushed Luffy away in vain, since Luffy's neck simply stretched out.

"He's *so* interesting! I want him on the crew! He's coming with us!"

Luffy's eyes sparkled, and his grip on Zoro loosened. Zoro pulled away and grumbled under his breath.

Kureha honestly had never seen someone faint on their feet from excitement before.

Chopper charged forward into *Jumping Point* and used Kuromarimo as a springboard – then, he shifted into *Arm Point* and struck Chess with a brutal thrust that knocked the wind out of him. Chopper also heard several ribs break from the impact.

Chopper turned on his heel as Kuromarimo called out for his partner – Chopper shifted into *Heavy Point* and gave the man an uppercut. Chopper winced only slightly when he heard Kuromarimo's teeth and jaw crack.

Chopper then turned towards Chess who was trying to stand. Chopper yelled out, "Just leave this island and *never* come back!"

He struck Chess with a fist, and the man went down and stayed there. Chopper nearly collapsed from exhaustion, but he remained upright. Just like he had promised, he defeated the pair in three minutes.

Luffy was *absolutely determined* to have Chopper on his crew, now.

Hiriluk

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"You should just leave," Condor said, giving a brief flap of his wings. "It'll make things easier for all of us."

"A...talking ostrich..." Sanji muttered in mild disbelief, really wishing he had a cigarette right then. Mostly because processing this properly required a dose of nicotine. He took in the sight of an *actual talking* ostrich that wore three bowties along the length of its neck. "I guess *anything* really *is* possible on the Grand Line."

Maybe he should just accept the absurdity and not question any of it.

"Greetings, I'm Condor," the ostrich spoke, raising a leg and spreading out his wings, "I've mastered several forms of karate, even Fishman's. It would be best to surrender."

"Sorry, that'd go against my Captain's orders," Sanji replied. "Ostrich meat is best prepared rare to medium rare. Can't take your eyes off

it.”

Condor admittedly became a tad nervous. This guy was seriously talking about *cooking* him?!

“Low-fat meat cooks faster than other meat products.”

“...you can’t be serious.”

“Oh, but I am. My Captain woke up starving.”

“Enough of this nonsense!” Condor demanded, and he charged forward. He struck at Sanji with sharp kick.

“Javelin Strike!”

Sanji brought up his leg to block, then flipped forward into a spinning kick attack.

Condor flapped his wings as he responded with his own series of hits. Condor suddenly ducked down and thrust his beak outward several times, stabbing Sanji in the side. Sanji winced in mild pain, but he’d had worse hits from the Shitty Geezer.

Sanji brought down a kick as Condor was coming at him, *“Collier Shoot!”*

Condor squawked, and jumped away. Sanji pursued the ostrich.

Condor spun and doubled back. *“Triple-Heel-Beak-Strike!”*

Condor went through a series of moves that implemented his fierce kicks and his beak. Flapping his wings, he struck out with his heels. Sanji had to block both the kicks, and also worry about his talons. Condor had the advantage of reach, speed, and power.

Sanji managed a decent kick *Selle* that hit Condor in the side.

Condor winced and struck out fiercely, aiming for Sanji’s stomach. Sanji winced as he managed to dodge, but Condor’s claw ripped through his jacket and tore through his side.

“Perhaps I owe you an apology,” Sanji said, pressing his hand to his side. “I should take you more seriously, you shitty feather duster.”

He wanted to get this over with so he could attend to his precious Nami-swan, and Sweets-chan would definitely fret over him with an

injury as mild as this.

Sanji made a “bring it” gesture to Condor who obliged.

When Condor kicked out with an upwards strike, Sanji wrapped his leg around Condor’s. With a twisting motion, going forward; Sanji then struck Condor in the neck with *Collier Shoot*, followed closely by *Épau*.

Condor cursed and flipped himself around, managing to kick Sanji in the back; nearly between his shoulder blades. Sanji practically wheezed, and spun away from Condor just as he brought down another kick that made a large pit in the snow.

He was certainly going to bruise from that – and getting massages – Sanji sighed wistfully at the thought of warm weather and the beautiful ladies on the crew.

That would have to wait for now, though.

Sanji threw himself to the ground and rolled when Condor came at him with another series of rapid heel-strikes. Timing it perfectly was difficult; because if he wasn’t careful, Sanji could potentially tear up his legs on Condor’s claws. Then what good would Sanji be if he was that careless?

Taking a deep breath and concentrating, Sanji swept his Haki-enhanced legs towards Condor’s own.

“*Gigot!*”

Condor cried out in unexpected pain. Sanji was quick to follow up with *Poitrine Shoot*. Rapidly twisting his body to continue his momentum, Sanji hooked his foot behind Condor’s head and slammed it into the ground with *Reception*.

Perfectly fitting for an ostrich.

Condor gasped as he pulled away, bloody; and his wing was broken. Not only that, but his leg was terribly sprained and was already swollen several times its usual size.

Normally, Sanji would continue a fight like this, except he’d noticed as Condor slowly pulled himself up.

“Your Captain and crewmembers have already lost.” Sanji stated,

reaching to his mouth to let out a puff of smoke from habit. He stopped himself when he remembered, and looked forward to having a cigarette even more. "You should just leave."

Condor narrowed his eyes at him.

"Oh? You're giving us a chance to run away? Do you think we won't return once we've recovered?"

Sanji shrugged. "Alright, then."

Sanji wasn't always one to fight dirty, but he was a Pirate. A gentleman certainly, but only towards beautiful ladies.

"Returning wouldn't be a good idea." Kureha said, as she wielded a rifle. "You should take that traitorous King and your allies and leave, while you still can."

Cocking the rifle, Kureha added, "And if you are stupid enough to come back, this island will be your grave."

Condor unfortunately, was limited in what he could do. His injured leg didn't support his weight – and it was in no position to be useful for attacking.

Admittedly, and shamefully, it would be better to leave.

Condor noticed Wapol's missing limbs – and took in the sight of a defeated Chess and Kuromarimo.

"Very well."

Robson had no interest in doing anything but sleeping, so that forced Condor into carrying his crew down the Rockies.

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Condor noticed the defeated men, and the Ishii-20. He saw how all of them lingered off to the side, well out of the way.

"King needs treatment," Condor said in a commanding tone.

"Then you better go find a Doctor," one of the Doctors responded, and he crossed his arms.

"I hope you find one who can treat him," another added, as he also made no move to help.

“You aren’t welcome here, so get going while you still can.” Dalton spoke up.

It seemed that it was just the four of them.

Condor got them onto their submarine, and hoped that they could find an island to treat them soon enough. This wasn’t over. They’d be back soon enough, and Wapol would reclaim what was rightfully his.

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Chopper was quick to treat Sanji’s injuries, while Luffy chattered at him about joining their crew.

Kureha observed, closely.

“You people certainly have interesting abilities,” she shifted to look at Zoro – who decided that napping on Robson was a good choice, while Gaara had bundled himself up again and was happily nuzzling the hippo. The hippo moaned in contentment at the attention.

“Especially you two.”

“Hm?” Zoro opened one eye to look at her. “What’re you talking about?”

“His sand, and that teleporting ability.” Kureha then looked at Zoro. “Those eyes, I’ve actually met someone like you, oh...nearly forty-five years ago.”

Zoro sat up and looked at her. “What? Really?”

“Oh, yes.” Kureha nodded wistfully. “She was quite the troublemaker. If I remember correctly...” tapping her chin thoughtfully, “her name was *Escape Artist* Bonney Gin. Quite the notorious Pirate Captain in her time, and you know – even when the Government caught her, they could never keep her locked up!”

Kureha laughed.

“Made the lot of them look like fools!”

“What happened to her?”

“I don’t really know,” Kureha admitted. “I doubt someone like Bonney would be satisfied settling down. I imagine she either successfully went into hiding, or finally kicked the bucket.”

Zoro just nodded. There wasn't much he could do with that info.

"And you, controlling all that sand...is that some sort of Devil Fruit?"

"I could never eat something like that." Gaara replied without even looking at her.

"No? Ah, well."

She shrugged and made her way over to the others. She listened as Luffy, Sanji, and Nami were trying to convince Chopper to come with them.

Smiling sadly, Kureha knew that it was about time her student left. He'd already learned everything he could from her, and now... Kureha wiped her eyes to hide her tears.

"Hey, boy," she said to Luffy. "I'm curious. What's your goal?"

"To be Pirate King," Luffy answered easily.

"Of course."

"So, Chopper, you're coming, right? Say you want to come!"

"But I'm a monster..." Chopper said quietly. "Why would you—"

Chopper was cut off when Luffy yelled at him, "Shut up! You're coming with us, and that's final!"

Nami rolled her eyes. "What a way to invite him..."

Chopper looked at the Humans standing before him, and he began to cry. He thought of Hiriluk – and Luffy – and – he wiped at his tears. "Is it okay? Is it really okay if I leave?"

Kureha made a fist and took a deep breath. "You're seriously trying to steal my apprentice!"

Chopper yelped when something was thrown Luffy.

"Ah! Luffy!"

"Let's get out of here!" Luffy laughed as he grabbed Chopper, "Come on, Zoro, Gaara!"

Gaara looked as if he was seriously considering attacking Kureha,

except Luffy was laughing joyfully. They all clamored into the sleigh And Chopper transformed to pull them along.

“The hag’s suddenly went crazy!” Zoro said as several projectiles were thrown at them.

“What this?” Nami questioned, holding a large bag in her hands. “I found this in our seat.”

She inspected its contents and found supplies and clothing for Chopper. “I guess she didn’t want to say goodbye...”

Chopper of course, began crying even harder. He wished he could properly thank Doctorine for everything she had done for him.

Luffy whooped and stuck his arms out, having the time of his life. Zoro and Sanji were both ready to grab Luffy if he went out on a wild hair and suddenly decided to jump. Gaara hunkered down in his seat and looked miserable. Nami looked out at the passing scenery, and could see the lights for the villages. It looked peaceful.

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Upon reaching their ship, the first thing Nami asked in horrified shock was, “What the heck happened to your face, Usopp?!”

His face was swollen and bruised.

“Oh, there was an accident! But no big deal!” Vivi laughed nervously and waved them off. “I’m so glad to see all of you already feel better! Ha, ha, ha!”

“Mah facsh feelsh fine, do.” Ussop said. “Dosh it look that bahd?”

“It could be worse, ‘ttebayou.”

“Everyone, look!” Luffy happily introduced Chopper. “We have a new *nakama*! So that means we have to party.”

Everyone introduced themselves, and when Karoo quacked at him, Chopper said,

“Nice to meet you, Karoo. That’s amazing! I’m a Doctor.”

It was then discovered that Chopper could communicate with animals. Which was a really cool ability, and made Naruto want to have full-fledged conversations with Karoo.

“Oh, you’re a Doctor, Chopper?” Luffy grinned. “That’s so cool!”

“Of course he’s a Doctor,” Nami spoke up. “Why else would you invite him to the crew?”

“Seven forms, cool reindeer.” Luffy stated.

“Fluffy cuddle buddy.” Gaara said.

“I’d say fashionable pelt,” Pudding suggested.

“Emergency food supplies,” Sanji replied drily.

Chopper gaped, almost reconsidering joining the crew. Gaara grabbed Chopper protectively.

“No, Sanji! If anyone’s emergency food supplies, it’s Naruto!”

“Why am *I* always the one who’s eaten, ‘tebayou?!’”

“You’re the youngest. We all have to make sacrifices.”

Naruto stuck his tongue out at Gaara.

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At the castle, with help from the villagers, Kureha prepared the cannon. It was time for Hiriluk’s dream to become a reality.

The crew stared mesmerized as they sailed away. It was an amazing, beautiful sight of a sakura tree. Chopper wailed in his sadness for leaving and thankfulness, and thanked Doctor Kureha and Hiriluk for everything they had done for him.

They all continued watching until the sakura tree was just a speck in the distance.

Chopper of course, was quite surprised upon learning that Vivi was a princess, and they were going to save her country. Pirates were so cool! He was also equally surprised to learn that apparently Gaara and Naruto had Bijū.

So that’s why they both smelled different?

“Nice to meet you,” Chopper said, giving a polite nod.

He was also surprised to be told that one was named ‘Shukaku.’

He didn't have much to give in terms of offering, so Chopper left a couple of his Rumble Balls at the little Shrine.

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They drifted with no direction and no island in sight for weeks; their Navigator had been left on Drum, along with their only Log Post. The last of their rations had been eaten up just days before. They were able to catch a few birds and fish, but it wasn't enough.

Wapol was starving, exhausted, and sore. He was probably still alive because the most vital of his organs had been replaced with metal. He couldn't be too careful, but something still had gone wrong. Those damn Doctors had done something to him, he was sure of it! When he finally reclaimed his throne, the Doctors would be the first to suffer!

His stomach growled, loudly.

He eyed the men who worked under him. It was their job to make sacrifices for *his* sake, was it not?

It was far better for *him* to not starve.

He could make them better, anyway.

Kuromarimo, Chess, and Condor were soon devoured. They served their King very well, indeed.

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It was just a few weeks later when Drum received the newspaper, and Kureha realized Luffy's D. initial.

It seemed that Chopper had joined a dangerous man. She smiled knowingly and cackled at the thought. She gave Robson a scratch behind his ear, and the hippo grumbled contentedly.

Chapter End Notes

look at them they're so beautiful

<https://datiaknowsshit.tumblr.com/post/189881162092/datiaknowsshit-by-your-side-is-where-i-belong>

Author's Ramblings:

I wanted to avoid completely rewriting scenes unnecessarily, and

I really wanted to get this chapter published because it leads into everything that will happen in Alabasta.

Condor is a Naruto-anime only character that well, got made one of the bad guys here.

Thank you to Kitt21 for having the nakama tattoo idea.

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Zoro: "Why would you buy the brats clothing that they'll grow out of and have to throw out anyway? You should buy stuff that they'll grow into. It lasts longer that way."

Nami: "Zoro-kun, they should at least have clothes that actually fit."

In the end, they compromised and bought clothes that actually fit.

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It's highly debatable whether or not King Arthur even existed.

There are just so many stories surrounding him that it's become impossible to tell if he was even a real person.

Concerning the Biju and how/why people know about them: even though there's historical documentation, there's an oversaturation of real/fake stories; people telling the same story but from different perspectives and expanding on them to make them more incredible, people basically writing fanfiction of the Biju doing incredible things...then the Biju disappear, and they become fantastical stories.

My own personal headcanon for the series/this fic is that Sanji goes with them to the hospital because he needs to make sure that Nami's going to be okay, since his mother was sick at one point too. We all know how that turned out...

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Captain Donner – a reference to the Donner Party.

If you don't know who the Donner Party is, morbid history time:

Led by George Donner, they were a group of American pioneers who migrated to California in a wagon train from the Midwest, and were vastly ill-prepared to make the trek. They had the most unfortunate luck that any group could have, suffering various mishaps along the way.

In 1846-47, with their supplies running low and they being exhausted, they got trapped in the worst snowstorm the Sierra Nevada mountain range had seen in years – think snow that's over 20 feet high.

In desperation after they'd run out of supplies, some of the migrants resorted to eating the bodies of those who died of starvation/illnesses. George Donner and his wife Tamsen were both eaten.

Of the 83 members of the Donner Party who were trapped in the

mountains, only 45 survived to reach California.
This is just the shortened version of the story. The full story is much worse.

Being a Captain isn't All Sunshine and Roses; sometimes it's Dark Days and Bitter Thorns

Chapter Summary

Luffy faces his first difficult choice as a Captain

Chapter Notes

Evil laugh

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

On a Marine Ship, somewhere in Paradise:

Captain Smoker frowned as he checked the supplies list, and compared it to the bill from when they last resupplied the ship.

"Someone's takin' more than their fair share," his grizzled cook griped, pointing at the list. "Way more."

"What exactly has been taken?" Smoker asked.

"Meat, and lots of it."

Stealing was certainly frowned upon – especially when it was from a communal resource that all of them used and needed.

Smoker decided the only thing he could do was interrogate the crew. He'd need help, so that meant he'd ask Tashigi.

"Oi, Tashigi." He knocked on her door, and heard something inside her cabin.

He tilted his head, trying to listen. She was scrambling? Had she lost her glasses? There was a crash and a yelp of pain. Rolling his eyes, Smoker could just imagine her rolling around on the floor holding a stubbed toe or maybe her shin.

"You have ten seconds to get decent and then I'm coming in."

There was more fumbling, and exactly ten seconds later Smoker opened the door. Tashigi started shouting a protest but quickly

silenced herself as she grinned at him shakily. Her room was in disarray. Odd, since she was usually so organized.

Slowly, Smoker took in the sight of the room; strewn books; a sword maintenance kit; a very realistic stuffed lion toy on her bed; pictures of her with her family and one with her cousin on the bedside table; numerous pillows that were more for decoration than sleeping; a throw rug on the floor, a –

Smoker's eyes went back to the lion.

It blinked at him.

He blinked back.

“Tashigi. What is a lion doing in your cabin?”

“...” Tashigi looked exceptionally guilty. Very much like the child that brought home a puppy when they were told they couldn't have pets. Except, this was an adult – a Marine woman with a lion on a ship.

Tashigi looked teary-eyed.

“They were going to kill him.” Tashigi hugged the lion's head and it purred loudly as it nuzzled against her. All that could be seen of her was her legs. Tashigi's voice continued, “I just couldn't let it happen... he's an innocent lion!”

Smoker groaned. “That's *Beast Tamer's* lion, isn't it,” which wasn't a question.

“Richie may have belonged to a Pirate, but he didn't *do* anything!” Tashigi argued from behind the lion's head.

“He's attacked people.”

“Only on *Beast Tamer's* orders! He hasn't attacked anyone on this ship, and he's really smart – there's no way such a beautiful creature deserved to die for something so petty!”

Smoker pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling a headache coming on. Tashigi shifted so that she could see him; and was looking at him with pleading eyes, along with the damn lion.

“We have to stop and resupply.” Smoker finally said. “The cost of feeding that thing is coming out of *your* pay – and if it attacks the men or anyone – it's becoming a floor rug. Got it?”

“Thank you, Smoker-san!”

When Tashigi revealed her newest pet to the rest of the crew, all of them cooed, oohed, and ahed over the lion. It didn't take very long for the crew to tie some Marine-blue material as a scarf around Richie's neck and put a Marine's cap on his head. One of the ladies had some bobby pins to help keep it in place.

“We have a mascot, now!” one of the men joyfully announced.

Smoker grumbled under his breath about the absurdity of it all.

Richie thought that this was the life, reveling under all the attention bestowed upon him.

In a prison cell back in Logue Town, Mohji was for once in his life, thankful to a Marine, bitter as it was. At least, Richie was going to be fine.

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With the Straw Hat crew:

Now that they had one more crewmember, that meant clearing out a space for Chopper. They chose a drawer of the dresser that was closest to the floor to make it easier for Chopper to reach. As Naruto was cleaning the drawer out, he found various knickknacks that he and his brothers had collected over the years during their travels.

Naruto nearly got distracted from all the cool things he was finding. Even Chopper was looking over some of the older items with interest.

Old clothes the brothers never really had gotten around to getting rid of; mixed with various scrolls that either contained items or Jutsu.

“What's this?” Pudding asked, pulling out an older scroll that had been stuffed in the back of the bottom dresser drawer, which was a bit crushed and clearly forgotten about.

Naruto took a look at it before saying, “Oh, hey! It's the instructions on summoning Toads!”

“You can *summon* Toads?” Usopp asked excitedly. “So cool!”

“Yep! And we can use them for messaging people too, ‘ttebayou.”

“Ohh!” Luffy shared the excitement. “Can you show us?”

“Why haven’t we been doing that?” Sanji asked. “That would be so useful.”

Rubbing the back of his head, Naruto chuckled uncomfortably. “Oh. Um. Well. I kinda...” Naruto mumbled quickly, “I kinda, sorta, might have...um, *forgot*...to train how to summon them, ‘ttebayou...”

“You *forgot*?!” the crew echoed.

“Yeah! Ha, heh...how about that, huh?” Naruto quickly went back to clearing out the drawer, not even attempting to come up with an excuse. He’d genuinely forgotten about the scroll; and with all the traveling he and his brothers had done over the past few years the scroll had been packed away. “Look at all this stuff we still gotta clean!”

“Oi, cactus-head.” Sanji poked Zoro’s leg with his foot.

When Zoro blearily peeked up at him with one eye, Sanji demanded. “Why the hell is the shitty brat just remembering *now* he can summon shitty Toads?”

“Oh, that.” Zoro yawned lazily. “I forgot. Anyway, the Toad Sage is the one who gave the Contract to him, so it was his job to remember.”

None of that meant anything to him. Sanji scoffed, and asked Gaara the same question.

Gaara just shrugged. “I figured Naruto would just summon them when he absolutely needed them. Besides, he has to lose his fingers to summon them, so he has a limit of ten.” An absentminded thought was spoken aloud: “Maybe he could resort to his toes?”

“Really?!” Chopper tearfully asked, wide-eyed with worry.

“No I don’t!” Naruto protested, sticking his head out the cabin window. “Stop telling them weird things, ‘ttebayou!”

Gaara stuck his tongue out at Naruto, looking pleased.

Zoro was relieved that he could start getting back into relative normalcy, being able to train again. Chopper though, still wanted him to be careful just in case.

Gaara was more than happy to finally strip down to his regular clothes and be free of his shoes once the weather permitted it.

Pudding started training to increase her endurance and chakra. She wanted to be able to have Seals on her arms to hide weapons, just in case. Plus there were times that Zoro wanted to spar – who was Pudding to deny him that chance? Bonus: he took off his shirt to train. The scars and the muscles made her giddy.

Plus: the sweat, the closed distance, feeling his breath wash over her as he loomed above her where she was completely vulnerable! Pudding squealed to herself and blushed.

There was no use of Jutsu, and no serious injuries. They both agreed that a small cut would be fine. Though, Sanji and Chopper both had reasons of their own for protesting this.

Chopper actually had to talk them down from doing anything that may have required stitches – and really, did the two have to act so disappointed for not being able to make each other bleed?! Once the two reluctantly agreed, Chopper went to grind some herbs in frustration.

Sanji threatened bodily harm to Zoro if he hurt Pudding.

Zoro rolled his eyes, and Pudding giggled.

It was simply Zoro's swords and Pudding's knives.

Zoro had brute strength, while Pudding had flexibility.

They both had speed, and Zoro found himself having to dodge her strikes more than once. She would block with a knife in one hand, and continue blocking with sparks flying from the opposing blades as she charged forward; a second knife ready to stab.

Zoro smirked as he pulled away, clearly enjoying this. He refused to hold back against Pudding when it came to sparring with blades, counting on her to block and strike and hold her own. It was mildly disappointing he did have to hold back to keep from accidentally

wrecking parts of their ship.

Annoyingly, Sanji would simultaneously threaten Zoro and cheer for Pudding all in one breath every chance he got.

Also annoyingly; at various times, when Pudding closed in – she would make flirtatious comments under her breath and managed to get under Zoro’s skin with them. She’d noticed his obliviousness most of the time. Such a wonderful skill she had for this!

Saying things like, “The taste of victory is sweet; but the taste of you is far sweeter,”

She also used euphemisms about swords – and made absolutely sure that Zoro completely understood what she was saying by being as straightforward as possible. Zoro got so thrown by her completely random and outlandish comments she was able to come very close to a “killing” blow more than once. In his frustration, he would hit even harder – and she would make some sort of noise in response.

“None of that is appropriate!” A horribly blushing Usopp yelled from the sidelines, and he pulled their youngest two crewmembers away from such indecency.

Since Zoro wouldn’t attack her from behind, she’d get the advantage by turning her back to him and saying something about being defenseless.

She was very satisfied with him getting flustered and annoyed more than once during their spar.

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Initially, Naruto had wanted to start training to use his kusarigama at the same time. He sort of had a method of holding onto the handles and spinning – though, his movements were limited while on Merry. He imagined ways he could spin; utilizing his Wind Chakra and Demon Blade Techniques.

He at least practiced what he could with limited space. Finally, he got around to the thing he really needed to be practicing.

With the entire crew observing with different levels of curiosity, Naruto bit his finger and Summoned a Toad. It was a flopping tadpole the size of his fist.

Even so, the crew cheered in their amazement.

“You actually did it!” Usopp was very impressed.

“So cool...” Luffy stared at the tadpole.

Naruto didn’t feel too bad for failing in his first attempt.

Going over the instructions again carefully, Naruto tried again. This time, it was a genuine Toad! It was a tiny thing, not that much bigger than the Tadpole.

“I did it!”

“Wow...” the Toad sighed in a squeaky voice, before glancing around curiously. “Such strange people...”

“He’s *so* cute!” Pudding exclaimed, causing the tiny Toad to blush.

“And he talks, too!” Chopper said happily.

“You aren’t a Summon,” the tiny Toad observed.

“I’m Toni-Toni Chopper, a Human-Reindeer and a Doctor. Nice to meet you.”

“I’m Gama-Aoi.” Gama-Aoi turned his attention to Naruto. “I need payment now, because you Summoned me.”

“*Huh?* Payment?” Naruto echoed eloquently.

Nami had the look of someone who was curious and annoyed, with a hint of worry. Did the Toad want money? If so, how much?

“What do I owe you?” Naruto asked.

“I want something shiny!” Gama-aoi announced cheerfully.

“Here, you can have this shiny button.” Usopp offered, and the Toad happily accepted before disappearing in a poof of smoke.

Naruto tried again, and this time, he got a much larger Toad. This one was near Chopper’s size.

Yaogama demanded payment in sweets, and Pudding happily offered some of her apple-butter caramel candies. The expression on the Toad's face from trying the sweets was one of euphoria.

Next, was another Toad that was near the same size as Yaogama. This one glanced around and questioned, "We're outside of the Barrier? Interesting."

Rokugama introduced himself, and the crew introduced themselves as well. His payment was something spicy – and Sanji offered up a few spicy meatballs.

Rokugama had a small taste, and then grabbed Naruto's arms. "*Please* Summon me again, soon!"

Rokugama disappeared.

Another Toad, Yogama, wanted something salty. She was introduced to the crew, and thought that meeting a princess was genuinely fascinating.

Origama wanted a single gold coin, and Nami tearfully parted with it.

"Hey, can we use you to send a message?" Naruto asked.

Origama shook his head. "I'm still too young for that! You need to summon the older Toads."

"Too young...? Okay."

That was disappointing.

There were a few repeat Summons, and this gave the Toads and the crew chances to talk. The Toads wanted payment upon every return; *especially* if it involved food. They were elated to be able to take something back with them when they left.

It seemed that all the Toads that he'd summoned were *all* too young to have responsibilities like carrying a message. Apparently, it had to do with how much endurance the Toads themselves had when traveling to meet the receiver.

"So we're just paying you to show up for a few mints, 'ttebayou?" Naruto griped, sounding very much like Nami just then.

The Toad didn't deny it.

Naruto felt mentally drained, but he pressed on.

Umagama wanted something sweet and salty.

Sanji gave the Toad a few samples of sweet and salty foods, and that was good enough.

“...Maybe you should only practice that on land.” Zoro suggested after a few more rounds of repeat Toad Summons. “Some of those Toads can be bigger than the ship, remember. I don’t think we wanna crush our ship with an oversized Toad.”

Naruto agreed. “At least I can summon, now...I can’t wait to summon something *really* big like the old man, ‘ttebayou.”

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It was starting to get boring. There were only so many rounds of “I spy” a person could go through before they ran out of things to see. Between all of them, chores were finished within hours.

Sanji then figured he’d work in the galley, planning and preparing future meals for the crew. He’d kicked Luffy out for trying to sample the various ingredients.

“Sanji’s so mean,” Luffy complained, but his crewmembers were equally coldhearted.

Various responses consisted of, ‘then you shouldn’t have been eating when you weren’t supposed to’ and ‘well, the kitchen’s Sanji and Pudding’s space, isn’t it?’

Luffy then decided that he would fish for his food, so he could have a snack.

“Why’re you fishing?” Naruto asked.

“Because I’m hungry, and Sanji kicked me out.” Luffy logically explained. “So I’m getting my own food.”

“Oh...okay.” Naruto frowned at this. “Are you going to cook it yourself, ‘ttebayou?”

Because he'd seen Luffy's complete lack of cooking skills all the way back in Orange Town.

"No, I'll have either Sanji or Pudding do it."

Naruto's frown deepened. Luffy's reasoning was a bit...lacking? But it also somehow made sense?

Chopper sat on the railing next to Luffy and swung his legs over the side. "But I thought that Sanji kicked you out."

"If I get my *own* food, then I can eat." Luffy explained, clearly his reasoning was perfectly logical.

"I guess." Usopp replied, not really thinking too hard about Luffy's logic.

He grabbed a fishing pole as well, simply because he was also bored. He'd already made several sketches of ideas for weapons; whittled a few wooden figurines; messed around a bit more with his own weapons and traps; played a few card games with the others, and then...that was it, really.

He'd run out of things to keep himself occupied.

So now, here he was holding a fishing pole.

If they caught anything, they could probably preserve it. Dried fish was always a nice snack.

He groaned when he pulled up sea weed for what felt like the fiftieth time in three hours.

"It's still useful," Naruto said as he laid it out on the deck to dry.

Karoo happily ate some of the dry seaweed and quacked satisfactorily.

They almost would have caught some sort of sea-cat, but Vivi yelled something about the cats being like deities and she slapped Naruto, Luffy, and Usopp.

Naruto complained that he hadn't even done anything.

Luffy complained that Vivi was mean.

Usopp complained that Vivi hit too hard.

Vivi simply replied that they shouldn't just eat the random creatures they came across.

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"Oh! I got something big!" Luffy excitedly declared, as he was nearly yanked overboard. Usopp was quick to latch onto the fishing rod and help Luffy.

Finally! Luffy could already taste the fish that Sanji would prepare – and Pudding would certainly be making a dessert out of it!

Instead of a fish, though; they got a man.

"You saved me!" the waterlogged man coughed. He was dressed very eccentrically. After coughing up what had to be a gallon or more of seawater, the man spoke in a sing-song voice. "My life was saved by Pirates I don't even know~!"

He sounded far too chipper for a guy who'd just been a few watery breaths short of drowning.

The man winked at Vivi who was observing him curiously from the deck above. "Hello, cutie~!"

Vivi grimaced, mildly creeped out. But she was a princess so she plastered on a smile and waved politely.

The crew introduced themselves, and the man introduced himself as Bon Clay.

"What were you doing out here, Bon-sweetie?" Pudding asked, handing him a towel.

"My ship unfortunately hit a weather spot and I fell overboard," he explained, wiping his hair and face before replacing his strange headwear. His makeup wasn't even smudged. "Thankfully, my swans also function as a floating device for situations such as these. But since I'm a hammer, I couldn't do much."

"You poor thing, I'll be right back." Pudding said, and quickly went off to the galley.

"I guess you always have to prepare for the worst." Nami commented. This Bon Clay guy was an example to follow.

"You ate a Devil Fruit, huh?" Luffy inquired sympathetically.

"I did, I did," the eccentric man nodded.

"Which one?" Usopp asked.

"It's *very special* one!" Bon Clay happily answered with an air of mystery and dramatically waved his hands.

"You look exhausted, here," Pudding now handed him a warm drink and a platter of various sweets. "This should help."

Bon Clay began to cry, because he was cold and starving, and yet this girl; this beautiful girl showed such kindness! He took one sip and began to cry even more about how kind and generous Pudding was. He also raved about the sweets.

"Oh, I'm not very kind," Pudding denied with a small smile.

"Oh, but you are!" Bon Clay then stood up. "Since you've rescued me and shown me such kindness, I'll put on a show just for you! My ship will circle back around eventually to pick me up, they know where I am."

Luffy was closest to him, and Bon Clay drew back a hand and slapped Luffy hard enough that he was slammed into a wall of the ship. Fortunately, he didn't break through it.

"Hey!"

"Luffy!"

The crew was ready to attack, when...

"Wait, wait, wait~!" A second Luffy now stood before them, "*Ta-da!* I *said* I was putting on a show!"

Zoro balked. That was *uncanny*. He had a bad feeling creep into his gut.

"It's *me!*" Luffy gasped in amazement.

"Surprised you~!" the fake Luffy cried out, echoing the phrase like an annoying parrot as he wiggled in a strange dance. "When I touch

myself with my left hand, see, back to normal~! This is the ability I gained from eating the Mane-Mane Fruit!"

"Everything about him..." Usopp was in awe. "His voice, down to even his physique are the same!"

He even had the most recent small scars Luffy had acquired that hadn't quite faded yet.

Being well aware of what a person imitating another could do, Zoro tried to warn the others. He was cut off, though.

"I'm next!" a blushing Pudding stepped up, though she pouted when Bon Clay merely touched her face with a brush of his hand. She huffed and scowled, crossing her arms. Why couldn't that guy slap *her*?

The guy also moved deceptively *fast*. Bon Clay proceeded to touch Nami, Naruto, Chopper, and Usopp's faces, spinning and humming a bouncy tune.

"Don't touch me." Gaara glared up at Bon Clay, who wisely didn't push his luck. He just uneasily laughed in response.

Zoro had absolutely no desire to have another him running around, so he also glared and flicked Wado; making a satisfying **shink** sound that made Bon Clay wary.

Not wanting to risk losing a hand, he avoided the Swordsman. Plus those silver eyes were damn creepy!

"Zoro, don't threaten him!" Luffy whined.

Zoro just raised his brow at Luffy.

"Get ready for a fantastic show~!" Bon Clay said with a sing-song voice, and then began to shift through all the faces of the crew quite rapidly.

"Over here, gather 'round, folks!" Bon Clay called out like an announcer at a much larger venue, "If I touch my face with my right hand, I can imitate *anyone*," His face landed on Pudding's, "just like this! Even the body! Observe carefully!"

With quite the dramatic flair, the fake Pudding proceeded to flash the crew. The boys all averted their eyes rapidly, blush evident on their faces.

“Oh, no, how humiliating!” Pudding cried, putting a hand to her blushing cheek. She made no attempt at reprimanding Bon Clay.

This made up for not slapping her.

“Knock it off!” Nami was the one to deliver a fierce punch to the fake Pudding’s head.

“Ouch...”

“Show a little shame!” Nami demanded of Pudding.

“I was forced to expose everything.” Pudding was way too happy. “I looked so good, though. I’m glad I have nothing to worry about.”

Nami scoffed.

“Hey, are you okay?” Luffy asked Bon Clay, who had a very visible bump on his head.

“I’m fine,” Bon Clay groaned, not really sounding fine at all. “Well, I shouldn’t show you anymore of my ability then...”

“Do some more!” Luffy pleaded, and Usopp echoed. “Please!”

“A transforming ability is amazing!” Chopper praised.

“But you’re so cool! Do my face again, ‘ttebayou!”

“Please, please, please!” the small group pleaded.

Naruto went so far as to give Bon Clay the *look* that more often than not, made even Zoro give in. Bon Clay didn’t stand a chance.

Bon Clay blushed, his ego far too easily stroked with their comments. They were so happy about it! His performer heart couldn’t deny them.

“Ah, really? I guess I have no choice, then!” Bon Clay said, as if he’d been worn down from their asking. “I’ll show you my memory ability!”

Luffy, Usopp, Chopper, and Naruto cheered.

“He’s going along with them,” Nami complained.

“I don’t like this.” Zoro said, openly glaring. “I don’t trust that guy.”

Glancing at Zoro, who looked particularly grumpier than his usual self, Nami frowned. “He doesn’t seem *that* threatening.”

Considering the guy cried about Pudding being nice to him and was currently laughing and dancing with the crew...

“That’s what worries me.” Zoro said. “You seriously think that a guy who acts like a likable idiot who can get along with people he just met...” he paused. “Luffy doesn’t count – and can *imitate* anyone he touches – *isn’t* a threat?”

“Well...when you put it like that...” Nami shifted so that she could sit beside Zoro.

“Sensei told me that the people who pose the biggest threat are those who don’t seem to pose any threat at all.” Zoro held Wado in a near-white knuckled grip.

Maybe Zoro was just overthinking it, or at least Nami hoped he was. It was comforting yet made her uneasy in equal parts that Zoro would be so suspicious of someone. This Bon Clay guy was strange, but he seemed so...harmless.

Bon Clay continued dancing and changing faces; and the others clapped and cheered.

“Oh, there’s my ship!” Bon Clay called out nearly ten minutes later. He began waving his arms, “I’m here, I’m here~!”

Bon Clay jumped up and landed elegantly on the railing next to Nami. In a very dramatic tone, he said, “So. My time has come to depart. How tragic.”

The four he had been dancing around with began to cry and beg Bon Clay not to leave.

Even Luffy called out a wistful, “I wish he’d join my crew...”

“Don’t be sad. Journeys and partings go hand-in-hand.” Bon Clay turned to look over his shoulder at them. He turned to give them a fabulous thumbs-up. “But, remember this: to true friendship, how long you’ve known each other means nothing!”

“Such wise words, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto sobbed.

“Bon-sweetie,” Pudding smiled as she handed him a small bag of

treats. “To share some love with your crew.”

Bon Clay took the gift appreciatively. He smiled warmly. “I’m sure we’ll enjoy every bite. Thank you.”

“Oh, *fahbu-lous~!*” a voice called out from the other ship as it pulled up next to theirs. “Bon-Bon, I’m so glad to see you’re okay!”

“White-chan!” Bon Clay greeted with equal enthusiasm.

A person dressed in an eye-blinding outfit from how sparkly and electric blue it was stood by the railing on the opposite ship. They had a massive feathery collar and feathery headdress-crown thing covered in beads that clicked together whenever they moved. They were either a very beautiful man or a very handsome woman.

They raised their hands up, and speaking in a lilting, theatrical voice, “Thank you, *dah-ling* Pirates for helping my *fahbu-lous* partner! You’re far too kind!”

“Of course!” Luffy smiled. “We didn’t mind at all. It was fun!”

Just about every member of the other crew wore some sort of eccentric and colorful outfit. All of those people felt genuinely happy and friendly; their emotions tickled Luffy’s Mystery Power in a gentle way.

“Don’t cry for me!” Bon Clay called out as he jumped elegantly across and landed on his ship on a pointed toe, pirouetting across the deck.

“Farewell, *dah-ling* Pirates!” the sparkly, feather-covered one called out, waving their hand like elegant royalty.

The crew waved goodbye to their new friend, tearfully.

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It was after Bon Clay and his crew were gone that Vivi dropped a bombshell on them:

“That was Mr. 2! And his partner, Mr. White Day!”

“*WHAT!*”

"I've heard that Mr. 2 wears swans on his shoulders, and that Mr. White Day wears extremely eye-catching outfits with feathers."

"That would have been good to know *earlier!*" Nami admonished, but she sighed heavily. There wasn't anything they could do but prepare with the knowledge that they had. "That guy now has our faces."

"Not everyone's, thankfully." Vivi said, only somewhat relieved. "Anyway, one of the faces that he shifted into was that of my father!" She was horrified at the thought. "What could they possibly want my father's face for?!"

"There's a lot a person could do if they have the King's face..." Sanji commented.

Zoro really didn't feel like gloating and saying that he was right. But maybe he did, just a little.

"None of you should have let him touch your face the moment you realized what he could do." Zoro berated them, but he just sighed and shook his head. "Well, it doesn't matter anymore. What's done is done. We need a plan *now* for what we're going to do when we cross paths with that guy again."

Zoro tried to think of a plan. It took him a few minutes.

"This is what we'll do – have a fake identifier with the *real* mark hidden underneath."

"Who knew you could have good ideas, Moss-ball?"

Zoro rolled his eyes. "Better than any you've ever had."

Sanji flicked his cigarette at Zoro; and Zoro managed to land a kick on Sanji's shin. The two nearly went into an inelegant brawl, but were cut off by Nami.

"If they know our faces, we don't have to worry." Naruto reassured them. He hinged into his red-haired female counterpart (fully clothed). "Call me Kushi-chan!"

Naruto of course, modeled this look after his mother. He still had the whiskers, but with this – there was no way Baroque Agents could recognize him now.

They could hide much easier this way.

Naruto shifted back, then said, “I thought that those Baroque people had boy and girl partners...so...why does Mr. 2’s partner go by Mister?”

“Because it’s clearly a guy pretending to be a girl.” Gaara replied, “Haku does the same thing. Their enemies are easier to kill that way.”

“No way! A *guy* could never be *that* pretty! That has to mean she’s a woman!”

“*Mr.* is literally in his name.”

“Why would any guy want to dress like *that*?”

The two boys started arguing about whether Mr. White Day was a woman or man.

“Why is this such a big deal?” Zoro asked, pulling his brothers apart. (The irony) “Who cares? What matters is that they’re an enemy. We have more important things to discuss, anyway.”

Nami was happy that Zoro wanted to plan, but she knew from experience not to get her hopes up.

Upon her request, Usopp made a new weapon for Nami.

“Gaara and Naruto helped a bit too,” Usopp explained, “We put some *kuroseki* and stuff into the staff.”

He also handed Nami some written instructions on how to use her new weapon. Usopp thought of everything! Nami was glad to have something of an ally in the Sniper who at least prepared for things like this.

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They arrived at the town of Nanohana near mid-morning of the next day. It was a beautiful town built with stone structures. The buildings were various colors of off-whites, grays, and shades of brown. There were a few buildings that had likely fallen into disrepair, but that didn’t take anything away from the town.

Gaara wiggled his toes in the sand, having a distant feeling of

nostalgia for a faraway desert and a village – with his uncle. He wondered if Yashamaru would have liked this place.

“We should get clothing that’s more suited for desert travel,” Vivi suggested, bringing everyone’s attention to her. “It’d also be better if we blended in, too.”

“Yay, shopping!” Pudding and Nami both cheered.

“We should get sunblock, too.” Chopper suggested.

“I wouldn’t mind a little sunburn,” Pudding happily said. “That means getting pampered...”

“I’ll help apply the sunblock to your backs!” Sanji volunteered. He also took Pudding’s hand in his. “If you get sunburned, I’ll take care of you, Sweets-chan.”

“Oh, Sanji-dear...”

Zoro scoffed at them.

Naruto, as Kushi, ran ahead. “This place is so cool, ‘ttebayou!”

“Let’s stick together!” Nami tried to remind everyone, though she knew it was pretty useless even trying.

“I’m hungry,” Luffy lamented, as if he hadn’t eaten the hearty breakfast his trusty cooks had made that morning. Luffy began looking around for a restaurant when he noticed something as they passed the town square. “Huh? Hey, guys! Come look at this!”

“Luffy, please don’t randomly wander off!” Vivi gently chided, worried about what could happen if they split up without a plan.

The crew followed after Luffy, and they stopped at a fountain – that was a statue of Ichibi. It was chipped in places, but it was obviously well-cared for.

“I knew it!” Luffy said. “It looks just like the little statue Gaara made.”

Gaara was flattered.

Ichibi didn’t know whether or not he should be insulted that Luffy could recognize him from the swollen cow-like blob of a figurine Gaara had made of him.

Everyone else stared at the statue and wondered how the heck Luffy could even make such an observation.

“Yeah, I can see it.” Zoro nodded. Sure, Gaara’s carving may be a loose interpretation but it was there.

“That’s how you look, huh, Kaku?” Usopp grinned.

“He’s a tanuki!” Chopper exclaimed, eyes sparkling.

“He looks so cool.” Luffy said.

“He’s so cute!” Pudding said. “I wish I could pet his little ears.”

Ichibi maybe was very thrilled at being praised. The crew could stand to do it more, he wouldn’t mind. He felt...almost *familiar* with this place. Like echoes of distant voices from a time long past.

Vivi tossed a coin into the fountain and whispered a prayer for safe travels and the rescue of her country.

Luffy took a whiff of something delicious, and being reminded of his hunger, he ran off.

“Luffy, remember to meet us back at the ship in an hour!” Nami called after him. Luffy at least turned briefly and waved before he ran into a nearby restaurant.

“At least we know where he is,” Naruto said, thankful they wouldn’t have to hunt Luffy down.

They formed various groups for certain tasks; supplies, clothing, and food.

Of course, maybe it was some twisted amalgamation of their combined luck that Captain Smoker – all the way from Logue Town – of all people, had tracked them down *here*.

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Luffy came charging towards the others, yelling something about Marines.

“Stop right there, Straw Hats!” Smoker ordered, as his men backed him up.

Pudding’s eyes widened when she saw Smoker. “I can’t believe he came all this way and actually found us again! This must be some kind of weird fate!”

“He’s a stalker.” Gaara added.

Smoker temporarily balked at being called a stalker. Annoyed at being called such, for he was just doing his job of upholding Justice, Smoker billowed out towards the Pirates; his men backing him up. Only, they were stopped by massive flames.

To everyone’s shock *Fire Fist* Ace appeared, with a cocky grin on his face and flames in his hand. His casual confidence at facing so many opponents made the Marines slightly uneasy.

“Oi, oi...” Ace drawled, “What’re you trying to do to my little brother?”

“Brother?” a few people around them echoed.

“Wow, Ace!” Luffy beamed. “Your flames got *even better!*”

“Of course, what’d you expect, Luffy?” Ace laughed. “I hope you’ve improved!”

“You bet! Hey! Let’s spar.”

“Of course!”

Tired of being ignored, Smoker charged.

But *Fire Fist* easily intercepted them while the Straw Hat Pirates escaped – and Ace was gone himself in a swirl of flames.

This was not good...Smoker frowned. One Pirate was already on the rise to infamy – and was a threat, somehow. But he was also the younger brother to *Fire Fist* of the White Beard Pirates. This was not good at all.

The crew made it back to their ship, where Ace was introduced to Luffy's crew with much enthusiasm and bragging. Luffy's comments made his crewmembers blush.

Naruto revealed his true self before turning back to his Kushi persona.

"You already have a pretty impressive crew, Luffy!" Ace praised, and Luffy grinned proudly. This made the crew blush even more.

Ace then looked at Zoro for a moment and said, "Hey, you look really familiar...huh..." he then snapped his fingers as he remembered, "You have silver eyes! Are you related to *Cherry Comet* Cheren Susie? She mentioned she had a fairly large family."

Zoro shook his head. "No, I was an orphan."

"Huh..." Ace shrugged. "Ah, well."

Zoro actually reminded Ace a bit of Touma, given that they both had those odd silver eyes – and Susie had never even heard of Touma – they all had to be some sort of distant relatives somehow.

"What kind of Devil Fruit do you have?" Usopp asked.

"Huh?" Ace frowned a little. "I didn't eat a Devil Fruit."

"What, seriously?!" Nami stared at him wide-eyed.

"That's so cool, 'ttebayou..."

"How could a power like that not be a Devil Fruit?" Usopp demanded. There was no way for someone to have fire powers naturally!

Was there?

"I just could never eat something like that," Ace responded in an off-handed way.

"Your family is insane," Nami told Luffy very factually, and Luffy smiled proudly and didn't disagree.

Luffy happily told Ace about what they were doing in Alabasta – the short and sweet version that pretty much was all over the place. Ace was able to put enough of the details together to understand what Luffy was saying. That sounded pretty intense, and of course his brother would have the sort of luck to get pulled into some sort of Warlord's conspiracy to take over a country.

Ace was on a personal mission but couldn't stay for very long. But he of course spent some more time with Luffy, and they held a few arm-wrestling matches for old time's sake.

Before he left, Ace handed Luffy a small square piece of paper. "Here we go, this is for whenever you want to find me."

Ace grinned, "So, just to be sure – you really don't wanna serve under the Old Man, do you? This is my final offer."

"I don't wanna serve under anyone." Luffy half-complained. "I'm gonna be the Pirate King."

"Alright then," Ace said, adjusting his hat. He sent a challenging smirk to Luffy. "I intend to make the Old Man Pirate King, so I won't hold back when we meet at the top."

"I'll hold you to that." Luffy replied very seriously, looking every bit like the Captain he was.

There was shouting a fair distance away – and they looked to see several Baroque Works ships.

Vivi nearly panicked.

Ace waved at the crew. "I'll take care of these guys, no worries. Good luck."

As the Straw Hats sailed away, Ace easily destroyed the ships as he left. There was little the crews could do. Their target was far too small; and could easily move between ships. Wood, sails, and oil lamps were basically fuel for fire to spread even if people weren't caught in the explosions. Even being surrounded by water wasn't enough to save the ships.

Those that did manage to strike Ace found that their weapons only went right through him – and he had no injuries.

"Seriously, how is a power like that *not* a Devil Fruit?" Usopp muttered.

"I dunno, really." Luffy hummed. "He just got really angry one time and set on fire, and he could do it ever since."

"Just...*how*?" Chopper now asked. "How could someone set themselves on fire like that?"

Luffy frowned. “He was protecting someone.”

From his darkened expression, Luffy didn’t seem like he was too inclined to share any more details.

“I’ve never heard of *anyone* being able to do that naturally.” Chopper said, looking curious.

“Touma said something about people having powers like that on some island on the Grand Line.” Luffy shrugged.

“Whoa...” both Usopp and Chopper were certainly curious about it.

“A-anyway,” Vivi spoke up, “we should warn my father. Karoo can send a message.”

Karoo quacked.

They set him up with some water.

“Make sure you conserve it, okay?” Vivi reminded, as she scratched Karoo’s head.

“Here are some snacks for energy.” Pudding put them in Karoo’s carry pouch. “Be careful out there.”

Karoo quacked appreciatively.

Gaara gave Karoo’s neck a goodbye scratch, and Karoo trilled.

He quickly ran off, already drinking his water.

“Conserve your water!” Vivi reminded a bit more harshly, her worry was blatantly obvious.

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They then sailed to the west side of the Sandora River. After making sure they had everything they needed for their journey, Naruto made sure Merry was protected with several Seals just in case.

Luffy and Gaara both were fascinated by the Kung-Fu Dugongs.

Within minutes, Luffy pretty much had a small army after beating them.

“Naruto, Gaara!” Luffy commanded, “Both of you take a group of Dugongs and show ‘em what you’ve got!”

The crew all sighed in mild exasperation as the boys went along with Luffy’s ridiculous command in showing the Dugongs fighting moves.

Zoro didn’t say anything, other than telling his brothers to correct their stances on certain things.

“I can’t believe he’s just going along with them.” Nami muttered, because she’d sort of hoped that Zoro would have been an ally in getting the others to pay attention and keep to their strict schedule.

Unable to help himself any longer, Gaara began rubbing the cheeks of various Dugongs – who all stopped their lessons for a quick break to get pampered. Upon seeing this, the other Dugongs wanted to get pampered as well.

With a loud, collective sigh the rest of crew had to spend some time massaging the Dugong’s cheeks before they could leave.

When they were finally, *finally* finished with the last Dugong, Nami reminded certain members of the crew not to get mixed up in any more crazy shenanigans.

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Gaara loved the desert, and it reminded him of his old home in various ways. He slowly began collecting bits of rock and handfuls of sand to add to his gourd and armor.

They soon came upon a destroyed town. The buildings were cracked and falling apart; everything was simply left to the elements. The broken branches of what had to have been formerly full, green trees stuck up out of the sand.

Vivi looked sad upon seeing it. “This is – *was* Erumalu. The Green City. I use to come here all the time as a little girl.” She pointed to the top of a building. “That was Taph Cathedral. Once a month, my father

and I would visit to offer prayers...”

She told the crew about the songs people would sing, how people would travel and trade.

Vivi pointed to a few more landmarks, telling the crew what they used to be. How the use of Dance Powder in a neighboring town made Erumalu dry up.

“That’s horrible...” Nami said, because she understood enough of the science behind the Dance Powder; and the environmental damage that it had upon the country. It would probably take several years for the air to heal – or maybe the damage was irreversible. The excessive use of Dance Powder probably even accelerated the natural process of an island sinking into the sea.

Vivi didn’t need any more on her plate, so Nami remained silent.

There was a section of particularly large trees.

“These were fruit trees, all of them were so good.”

The conversation made Pudding’s mouth water, and she nearly cried at the idea of fruit trees of that size dying – all the food that went to waste and she missed out on eating it. Of course, she was further saddened at the idea of people who had more than likely relied on the food in the desert – only to have it cruelly ripped out of their hands.

Shukaku felt...anger and sadness – a wistful feeling that he once visited this place, and it’d been so green and filled with life. *Someone offered him a basket filled with fruit – he had sat right there on that rock, it was perfect as a stool for him – the taste was juicy and sweet – but it was gone.* The rock that he’d often made his seat was nearly buried to the top in the sand.

His memories of Erumalu were...it hurt in a way he didn’t like thinking about. Like it never should have happened, not for hundreds and hundreds of more years – why did he feel guilty, somehow? What could he have done, if anything?

Erumalu was soon left behind them.

Luffy got himself into the middle of a wrestling match for the supplies he was carrying with some Warusagi Birds.

But with a few threatening slashes from Zoro and Naruto that merely clipped feathers; and few shots of sand from Gaara, the birds wisely backed off. They complained loudly from a distance – and those – the feather-brained *bastards* – pooped as they flew overhead.

Fortunately, no-one was hit. There would have been no easy way to bathe, and any water they had was strictly for drinking.

They stopped to relax and eat small meal. And when they weren't paying attention, Zoro up and wandered off. Luffy wanted to go look for him – but that idea was shot down because they didn't want to have to look for Luffy too.

Nearly an hour later, Zoro returned to camp with a camel.

"Saved this dumbass from getting eaten by a lizard," Zoro explained, and didn't offer anything more beyond that.

Sanji thought that it was troublesome with Zoro making them wait.

"You seriously need a leash, shitty-dumbass cactus." Sanji muttered.

Zoro purposefully muttered an insult under his breath to irritate Sanji – making him loudly demand, "What did you say?!"

"I wouldn't mind a leash." Pudding commented, interrupting Sanji's complaints.

Sanji coughed. "I would never do something like that to *you*..."

"It'd be fun, though."

"Why would you want to wear a leash?" Chopper innocently asked.

"There are *children* present." Usopp reminded the maybe-couple.

Meanwhile, both Naruto and Gaara were complaining to Zoro about leaving, and Gaara was seriously considering carrying Zoro with his sand.

"Oi, I don't need to be carried."

Nami and Vivi ignored the escalating and frankly childish arguments going on around them to check on the camel. Vivi got Chopper's attention so he could talk to the camel, and also to keep him from asking questions about why some people would want to wear leashes.

Chopper and the camel had a brief discussion, in which Chopper learned that their newest companion's name was Matsuge.

Matsuge rumbled, offering to carry the ladies – *only* the ladies. Vivi, Nami, Pudding, were thrilled at not having to walk. Naruto, still disguised as Kushi, lorded his foxy-victorious grin over the others from his spot on Matsuge.

"It's so unfair that Naruto can get away with that." Usopp complained.

"I'm the one who saved the stupid beast." Zoro also complained.

Matsuge scoffed and spit. Zoro glared furiously as spit dripped from his headwear. "I'll cut you in half!"

The damn camel was laughing at him!

"Oi, grumpy cactus," Sanji drawled. "I know you enjoy finally being able to speak to a creature of equal intelligence but we really need to get going."

"You calling me an idiot, damn cook?"

Sanji smirked a bit gleefully. "I didn't say that."

They continued walking, but now Sanji and Zoro were glaring at each other and throwing out insults as they went.

"Just watching them argue is making me tired..." Usopp said as he trudged along.

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At Spiders Café...

Crocodile was not happy. The Officer Agents all sat surrounded by a

heavy tension, waiting.

The Mr. 3 *and* Mr. 5 pairs were gone, and no-one had seen or heard anything from them. The check-in date had come and gone with no word. The only hint they had to go on was someone named Mr. Prince had something to do with it.

At first, Crocodile had thought that Mr. 3 had betrayed them – it was his Den-Den Mushi that Crocodile had been in contact with. But there had been nothing. None of the other Agents in Baroque Works had seen or heard anything. The Mr. 5 pair had been sent to meet up with Mr. 3 at Little Garden, and that was where everything had stopped.

There was no way a Weather Spot had taken *both* pairs out. Crocodile was clearly irritated that he couldn't put his finger on what had happened to them.

“What about the Princess?” Crocodile said to Miss All Sunday, his voice leaked irritation. His tone almost seemed accusing; as if he'd react very negatively to being told bad news. “Do you even *know* where she is? Or do we have to wonder about that, too?”

“She's with a group of Pirates,” Miss All Sunday replied with practiced ease. “They intended to make their way here.”

The Otter of the Unlucky pair raised a paw, holding up a sign. **‘We ran into the Pirates she's with.’**

They spread out a few sketched portraits.

Crocodile's eye visibly *twitched*.

“Is this a *joke*?”

Crocodile's irritation and anger rolled off of him in waves.

The Unluckies looked at him, confused and a little afraid.

He gripped a portrait in his hand, wrinkling the paper, and held it up. “This guy is dead.” He balled the portrait up and threw the offending paper ball at the Unluckies. It bounced off of Mr. 13's head. Crocodile wasn't exactly shouting, but he was near it. “The next one is currently leading the Billions, this one is Miss Valentine's Day, and this one... who the hell is *this*?! ”

Crocodile held up the final portrait.

Mr. 2 then stood up. “That girl! I know her! I...did I run into them?”
Mr. 2’s eyes widened in realization. “I ran into them!”

“Confirm with Mr. 2 that those are the Pirates,” Crocodile said to Miss All Sunday and the Unluckies.

The Unluckies seemed to be extremely confused upon seeing the Pirates as Bon Clay shifted into them; while Miss All Sunday easily confirmed who the Pirates were.

After shifting into the Pirates he’d come into contact with, he finally transformed into Pudding.

Mr. 2 stopped, confused. When he’d transformed into the girl before, he hadn’t noticed it – shifting through the various faces so fast. He’d also been distracted because he’d been putting on a show. Slowly, he pushed the bangs back to reveal a third eye.

Crocodile was on his feet so fast, he knocked his chair to the floor. He was staring wide-eyed at Mr. 2.

“They have a Third-Eye Tribe member on their crew?!” His reaction made everyone stare. Miss All Sunday’s jaw dropped – she regained control within seconds – thankfully, no-one noticed her control slip.

“I want that girl captured *alive*.” Crocodile said, orders absolute. “And no harm to her third eye, no injuries at all.”

“Why’s the *fahbu-lous* girl so important, Croco-chan?” Mr. White Day asked tentatively.

“Because she’ll help us in founding our Utopia.”

They got what pictures they could of the crew to have them distributed throughout their group.

Crocodile smiled. This was just one step closer to his ultimate goal.

The Officer Agents smiled along with him. They wanted their promised Utopia.

Mr. 2 felt a bit conflicted, even as he smiled.

Miss All Sunday didn’t know what to do.

It was the near evening when the crew reached a town called Yuba Oasis where an old man was working. It had been Vivi's hope that they'd meet the rebels there, because it was their base of operations. But they were already gone. They had just missed the rebels by a day or so.

It took Vivi a moment to recognize the old man, but when she did, "Toto-san!"

He was pretty much an uncle to her. She gripped him in a tight hug. Vivi honestly missed his usual plumpness – because this – she could feel the thinness of his frame. He looked so exhausted and worn; just like the surrounding buildings.

Vivi introduced the crew to him, telling Toto that they would be helping. She wished she could tell him that there were two Biju *right here* next to him. But it was such a complicated thing, and not even she fully understood their unique situation.

Toto did stare at Vivi curiously, she seemed so filled with hope and referred to the Pirates with an odd reverence.

Vivi began to explain that she and Koza, Toto's son, used to play together.

Sanji and Pudding prepared a meal for them, and Toto was extremely grateful to have such a full meal. Pudding and Sanji prepared a few future meals for him, since Toto was by himself. He shouldn't have to worry about such things when he was working so hard. He described having to work so many hours a day to keep ahead of the frequent sand storms. They would have a deep well and a prosperous Green City once again!

Toto gripped Vivi's hand in his own, promising her that it would be okay.

Vivi smiled sadly, feeling the thick calluses on his hand – and wished Koza were here. He should be *here*, helping Toto – not – not leading a rebellion against her father. If only she could talk to him!

"What's this?" Usopp asked, picking up a worn children's book out from a nearby table.

“Oh, that?” Toto smiled sadly. “That the story of how our beautiful country was founded. You know the tale of the great Ichibi, don’t you?”

The Pirates all looked at him strangely. Perhaps they did know it, and thought that he was a bit strange for believing that the Biju were more than mere stories.

“I used to read that book to Koza every night when he was little,” Toto looked at the old book wistfully. “Of course, he would always deny enjoying it – would never ask directly to read it. He’d just so happen to leave it on his nightstand...”

There had been a night so many years ago, before he’d turned so callous to the world, when Toto read that book to Koza.

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He sat with a young Koza, who looked up at Toto after they finished reading the book for the umpteenth time.

“The Ichibi is so cool! I wish I could see him...he’s like...he’s as big as a mountain! No...the sky!”

Toto laughed. “He really seems like it, doesn’t he?”

With all childish innocence, Koza asked, “Where are the Biju? How come they don’t come around anymore?”

Toto wasn’t sure what to tell him. He didn’t want to ruin the boy’s fantasies – to disappoint him by not having an answer.

“I...don’t really know.” Toto admitted. “I imagine the Biju are quite busy.”

“With what, though?” Koza asked, in that insistent-childish way. He’d likely keep asking until he finally received an answer that satisfied his curiosity. “They saved Alabasta and all those other countries, right? But... but there are places now that are always in trouble...I’ve heard people talk about them.”

Koza looked up at Toto, as if his father held all the answers to ever exist. “Why don’t the Biju help them anymore, dad?”

“Hmm.” Toto thought for a moment. “Perhaps they want us to deal with certain problems on our own, because they know we can handle it.” Toto reached forward, and ran his fingers through Koza’s hair. “But you want to know a secret? I believe that the Bijū will come again, especially when we need their help the most.”

“Really?” Koza looked at his book. “I still kinda want to see them – but – if they show up, that must mean we’re in really big trouble, huh...” Looking thoughtful he added, “So maybe I shouldn’t want to see them too much.”

Koza’s pouting expression housed all of his childish disappointment.

Toto laughed heartily at Koza’s logic and his pouting. “Yes, let’s hope we never reach that point!”

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Toto wished the crew a good night, as he had an early start tomorrow.

Toto had been up early in the day to dig for just one small canteen of water – which he gave to Luffy.

They wished Toto good luck and goodbye, with Vivi promising to visit again. It was a promise she hoped she could keep.

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As they walked, Vivi was trying to think of a plan – one that could stop Koza from making an irreversible mistake.

“I...I think we should we head back to Nanohana.” Vivi announced, and everyone stopped to look at her in surprise. “Gaara-sama and Naruto-sama could talk to Koza.” She sounded desperate and hopeful. “You could reveal the Bijū to him, and then maybe he’ll listen and won’t go forward with his plans of revolt.”

“But it’s already been a few days.” Usopp pointed out. “We might not make it in time.”

“I know you’re worried for your lover, Vivi-chan,” Pudding said, making Vivi splutter and blush about her and Koza being more like siblings, “We can’t head back or split up easily. Our supplies are already limited as it is.”

“Vivi,” Zoro was very blunt. “What makes you think that this Koza guy will even listen to the *brats*? It won’t matter that you’re vouching for them.”

“Surprisingly, I agree with the shitty cactus,” Sanji said, puffing out a stream of smoke. “He’s fighting against your father, he’ll just think it’s a trap or something.”

“But we’re friends!” Vivi argued. “He’ll have to listen. Koza *will* listen! If we go back, I’ll be able to--!”

“*NO!*” Luffy interrupted, and plopped down. “Don’t wanna. I wanna fight Crocodile!”

Vivi clenched her fists. “You just want to fight?! These are my people! I don’t want to lose anyone!”

“I don’t wanna go back to Namohima!” Luffy argued right back, rising to his feet. “It’s a waste of time! I’d rather fight Crocodile!”

“Is fighting all you care about?!” Vivi demanded.

“It’s better to go after Crocodile, otherwise he’ll just keep causing trouble while we’re out *here* and he’s *not!*” Luffy’s logic was surprisingly sound.

Frustrated and angry, Vivi slapped Luffy, *hard*. And then continued hitting him. It was a sad sight as Vivi began taking out all of her anger and stress on Luffy.

“I can’t lose anyone! My people are fighting a senseless war, and they have no idea they’re being manipulated! Why can’t you understand that I *need* to stop them?! *I don’t want anyone to die!*”

Luffy grabbed Vivi’s wrist, and held on.

“You’re being unrealistic,” Luffy was unexpectedly serious. Wow... seeing Luffy like this was... Before the crew could react, Luffy slapped Vivi hard enough that she fell to the ground. They all gaped at him. (Pudding tried not to be jealous.)

“There is a good chance that people *will* die, and there’s no stopping it, you idiot!” Luffy stood tall. “So let me kick Crocodile’s ass so you can focus on saving your country!”

There was certainly a more diplomatic way Luffy could have said what he needed to, but he’d gotten his point across.

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They had a plan, or at least something of a plan, as makeshift as it was. Rainbase was where Crocodile lived, and Luffy could fight him there.

Any innocent people would quickly leave, while the rest of the crew took on the Baroque Works members.

Upon reaching Rainbase, it turned out to be very developed. There was so much life there. It was a party town, which was exciting. Luffy felt the thrill of the people around him.

“Oh, look at that!” Luffy pointed, but he didn’t get a chance to run off and check out the awesome thing that had caught his interest.

Nami gripped Luffy’s cheek. “Stay focused, please! We have to check if Crocodile is even here – and if he’s not, we’ll destroy his base of operations, steal the treasure, find Vivi’s dad, and save the country.”

“I feel like you added a little something extra to that list.” Usopp said.

“I’ll help you get your treasure, Nami.” Gaara volunteered.

“I knew I could count on you, Gaara-kun!” Nami ruffled his hair.

“Luffy-sweetie, Usopp-sweetie, and Naruto-sweetie just left.” Pudding jovially announced with a bounce in her step. “It’s okay, though. They just went to that restaurant.”

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Of all the luck for Luffy to have, he, Usopp and Naruto-as-Kushi crossed paths with Smoker and Tashigi – and a lion.

“What are they doing here?!” Usopp practically yelled.

“Marine!” Luffy yelled upon seeing Smoker.

Mostly panicking in his shock, Naruto threw a smoke-bomb as they ran; Smoker easily burst through the haze – and Kyuubi yelled insults in the back of Naruto’s mind that he should have remembered smoke-bombs obviously wouldn’t have worked.

“Stop right there!” Smoker demanded, chasing after them. And when the hell did they manage to gain yet *another* crewmember in such a short amount of time?!

“Let’s go, Richie!” Tashigi commanded as she mounted the lion. Tashigi kept her eyes peeled for Zoro. He had to be here, somewhere! Richie roared as he charged forward with his rider.

“Why does she have a *lion*?!” Usopp wailed. He didn’t want to get eaten!

This of course, got the attention of all the Baroque Works Agents in the town who began to chase after the strange entourage.

The remaining crewmembers heard the commotion and looked, wondering what was going on.

“It looks dangerous...” Pudding said, not really being able to see just yet who was being chased. “I wonder if they’re vastly outnumbered...” she paused in her building fantasy to ask, “Isn’t that the smoke Marine and the others?”

“Oh, no...” Nami was about to make them hide when –

“GUYS! GUYS!” Luffy’s voice called out to them, dragging them into the chaos. Irritated at the fact they now had no choice but to join in and run, Nami swore that she’d pay Luffy back for this somehow!

Everyone else cursed Luffy – he felt a shiver ripple up his spine from the irritation of his crewmembers – and they all rapidly split into various pairs to escape.

Tashigi targeted Zoro in particular. Except he up and disappeared yet again, almost as if he were a ghost. Why would he run away like

that?! The nerve! Tashigi cursed him for many things; not fighting her properly; not taking her seriously; and most of all, for keeping Wado Ichimonji.

She'd get her cousin's beloved sword back, one way or another.

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"Quick, into the casino!" Pudding shouted. "Marines can't enter places owned by Warlords!"

Nami, Luffy, Usopp, and Naruto were right behind her. Smoker didn't care for such rules and continued chasing the Straw Hats.

Luffy pointed at a sign as they were running, "Hey, that's us!"

Sure enough, there was a VIP sign welcoming the Straw Hats, with arrows pointing down a hallway. Luffy followed the directions without question. This meant the others had to as well.

They were led to a dead end. Where were they supposed to go?

"Got you!" Smoker yelled, charging at Luffy.

"Hey!" Luffy dodged, and Smoker's jitte struck through the floor – which opened up beneath them. Not wanting to fall, everyone instinctively grabbed onto the most likely person to get them out of falling. That person was unfortunately Smoker – via Luffy – who had wrapped his arms several times around Smoker. Everyone else grabbed onto Luffy.

Smoker didn't have a chance to accommodate all of the sudden extra weight.

The trapdoor slammed shut overhead, effectively trapping them.

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It turned out to be a prison. Underneath the casino, with an aquarium

and an office.

Smoker was really the only one who thought that it was rather strange, and questioned everything. Why was a solitary cell *here* of all places? It just seemed impractical, even if it was a place reserved for those caught trying to cheat the casino. It was simply a very odd layout.

“This VIP room sucks, I wanted food.” Luffy complained. He slammed his fist on one of the bars only to have his energy drain out of him.

“Oh, no!” Nami panicked. “We have to get out of here!”

“I wonder if I could cut my way out.” Naruto said, holding up his weapon.

“You’d probably risk cutting us too...” Usopp glumly pointed out. “This cell is far too small for one of your attacks.”

Naruto then began trying to kick the bars. But they wouldn’t even budge. He began trying various Jutsu, except he was barely even making a crack or dent. The floor around them felt thick and strangely off. He tried flowing chakra into the bars, but it still wouldn’t respond.

It felt sort of like water...? But it was also stone and metal...? Naruto was good at flushing chakra into solid surfaces, but he’d never felt something like this before.

“Let us out, ‘ttebayou!” Naruto started chanting and slapping the bars.

“We’re in a prison...” Pudding was blushing happily as she muttered. “No chance of escape...”

Smoker looked on with a rapidly growing headache.

“Quiet, all of you!” he commanded, bringing their attention to him.

“Say Smoker, you could let us out.” Luffy said.

“I can’t. That stuff’s *kuroseki*. The entire cell has elements of it mixed in. It’s a Devil Fruit user’s weakness.”

“Oh. Let us out!” Luffy touched the bars again and collapsed.

Smoker took a deep breath, trying to quell his annoyance.

“Hey...why are you here?” Pudding asked, leaning towards Smoker.

Since they were trapped here, they might as well have a friendly conversation. Before he had the chance to respond, she continued, “Are you stalking Luffy-sweetie?”

“What? No!” Smoker denied, annoyed that this girl was asking such strange things. “I’m trying to do my job!”

“But then...” Pudding suppressed a strange squeak. “You...how do you explain finding us – finding *him*?”

A grin slowly spread across Pudding’s face, and she was blushing even redder now. “It can’t be a coincidence!”

Pudding then grabbed Luffy’s hands. “Smoker-sweetie is clearly in love with you, Luffy-sweetie! You should at least consider his feelings! You should tell him now, before you’re interrupted – whether or not you’ll reciprocate!”

She practically shoved Luffy over by Smoker.

“What the hell...” Smoker couldn’t believe this madness.

“...You’re in love with me?” Luffy asked slowly. He was bewildered and slightly disturbed. “You’re too old. I’m not interested.”

“I’m *not* in love with you, you idiot!” Smoker shouted, finally losing all composure. “And what the hell are you on about, putting that idea in his head?!”

“It’s a forbidden romance between a Marine and Pirate! The Marine is torn between his true love and duty!” Pudding babbled excitedly. “The Pirate can never settle down, for sailing on the high seas is his dream! Now it’s a romance in prison...! Shackles! Risking getting caught! Eeeee~!”

Pudding hugged herself and giggled happily.

Naruto looked exceptionally confused.

“Uh...Pudding...” Usopp asked a very blunt question. “Are you a *fujoshi*?”

“Absolutely not! That sort of thing is unnatural and perverted!” Her increasingly blushing cheeks and bloody nose made the truth abundantly clear. Pudding then turned away hiding her face. In a very small voice, she said, “...yes.”

She looked up at them, “I’m so ashamed that my ultimate secret is out...”

“This of all things is what you’re embarrassed about?!” Nami yelled.

Pudding was about to respond, when Crocodile entered the room; followed closely by Miss All Sunday who was dragging Vivi with her.

Crocodile was staring at them – though Pudding had an uneasy feeling that Crocodile’s eyes seemed to linger on her in particular for some reason. She began nervously twisting a lock of her hair – she’d learned to be especially cautious while living in Mama’s house.

Crocodile didn’t mind gloating a little, revealing his plan. Vivi snarled and yelled, and slipped away from Miss All Sunday, and attacked Crocodile.

Vivi was shocked when Crocodile’s head exploded with her strike, surely it wasn’t that easy...when Crocodile was on his feet and he slammed his fist into Vivi’s stomach.

She coughed and choked and collapsed to the floor, just barely hearing the others yell and curse Crocodile. He yanked Vivi up off the floor with such force that Vivi thought that he’d pulled her arm out of its socket.

Just then, the Den-Den Mushi rang. Crocodile shoved Vivi towards Miss All Sunday, and Vivi glared. She was such an idiot...Miss All Sunday had only let her go – because Crocodile was making a point. Vivi was powerless, and all she could do was watch her beloved country; her people tear each other apart due to his twisted schemes.

“You bastard!” Vivi cursed and yelled, thrashing against Miss All Sunday’s hold, and the Agent had to sprout a few extra arms to hold her back and stop the enraged princess from kicking her shins. A hand covered Vivi’s mouth, as she shook with fury.

“This is Mr. Prince.” Sanji’s voice came out of the receiver.

There was screaming coming from somewhere outside.

“You!” Crocodile snarled to the man on the other end. He slammed down the receiver and turned to Miss All Sunday. “Stay here.”

He ran out to deal with the troublesome Mr. Prince.

It was just seconds after he'd left, that another door opened; and an annoyed-looking Zoro wandered in.

"Now how the hell did I get here...?"

Various voices called out, "Zoro!"

Zoro stopped to take in the situation. His crew (and a Marine) in a cage, a bruised and angry Vivi, and Miss All Sunday with several hands all over her.

Zoro grinned and unsheathed his sword. "We aren't on a ship this time, you handsy bitch."

Miss All Sunday sprouted several hands all over Zoro and rapidly twisted his limbs and body – the bones snapped and popped and all the blood – everyone looked on in horror – then it was water and not blood that hit the floor.

Miss All Sunday gaped. What? How? Sweat rolled down her temple. She'd never encountered something like this before. Her eyes began rapidly scanning the room. She turned towards one of the tanks and her eyes widened upon seeing a ferociously grinning Zoro who raised his sword and somehow, impossibly – he moved through the water so easily – as if there was absolutely no resistance *at all* – then he sliced through the glass keeping all the water at bay.

Those in the cage stared, Luffy's eyes sparkled, while the others all looked on in horror.

"What the actual hell, Zoro?!" Usopp barely had time to demand.

Smoker couldn't believe it. This was *insane! How?* How could someone with such an ability *not even* be affected by the water?! It was as if Roronoa was just as easily one with the water.

The water exploded out of the tank, and Miss All Sunday blinked — a wave slammed into her. Her hands disappeared as her strength rapidly left her. And someone grabbed her – who – why would they save her? They were supposed to be enemies. She would have left them behind if their situations were reversed.

A sudden queasiness erupted in her stomach, and it felt like she was being squeezed in between thick walls. Miss All Sunday was dumped unceremoniously onto the ground. She coughed up some of the water she'd swallowed. Miss All Sunday blinked blearily, trying to see who

her rescuer was – a flash of an orange head covering that strangely seemed to disappear into thin air...

Why? *Why* had he saved *her* too? She didn't understand.

Miss All Sunday pulled herself up. She was inexplicably far away from the casino. She shakily pulled herself to her feet. She quickly began searching for Crocodile, working on some kind of excuse just in case – and was prepared to help if she had to – but – a part of her hesitated.

She hated that they made her question herself. She couldn't be doing that – not *now* of all times.

Still. What a strange crew.

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Smoker knew that the Straw Hats were crazy. He knew that going in. But no, that was an understatement. They were fucking *insane*.

Not only was Luffy some kind of absurd potential danger who was related to Dragon and *Fire Fist*, but that ability whatever it was – *not* Devil Fruit because the guy had been fucking torn up and used the fucking water to attack – fucking swam in the water – rescued him...

Oh, and to top it all off!

That blasted *Straw Hat* left him with, "I'm sorry that I won't ever be able to return your feelings. But I'm sure you'll find someone someday."

And *that girl*.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out. I do hope you find someone who returns their love as passionately as you express yours, Smoker-sweetie."

They'd said this *in front* of his subordinates.

Smoker practically snarled at them to leave, his face burning with mortified anger.

His subordinates valued their well-being and wisely said nothing.

No. No! Crocodile stared at the wreckage surrounding the casino. His soldiers had been beaten up.

The responsible party was gone.

“I am Mr. Prince!” a voice yelled, and Crocodile ran in the direction the voice came from. That bastard was suddenly gone.

Crocodile noticed a black-haired man with raccoon-eyes grinning at him from an alley, clearly mocking him. *That* had to be Mr. Prince. Again, Crocodile gave chase, but the man disappeared into thin air, *again*.

He returned to see his casino flooded, and Marines swarming the area. Miss All Sunday walked up to him, completely drenched.

Rage pulsed through Cocodile. The Third-Eye girl was gone!

He glanced out at the desert, and he could just barely make out those troublesome Pirates escaping. If he hurried, he still had a chance...

Billowing sand roared across the dessert, and Rains Base was a small speck in the distance.

The crew was currently riding a Moving Crab named Hasami, who was a friend of Matsuge. The crab ran quickly, and it turned out he moved much faster when the girls danced. His creepy, beady eyes seemed a bit too happy to watch.

But they wanted to get as much in traveling as they could.

“Isn’t that sand getting closer?” Gaara asked, pointing out the storm.

“Oh...that’s a dust storm.” Vivi said, sounding downtrodden. “We need to seek shelter – or have Gaara shield us. People can get lost in

them – and I knew a boy who got caught in one – he got so much sand in his eyes that he went blind. Others have pretty much suffocated and choked because they breathed in the sand”

Nami frowned, watching the dust storm. Her eyes scanned the desert, she had a bad feeling about that storm. “The wind is moving south-south-east... That storm is...” her eyes widened and her stomach pretty much dropped. “It’s coming right for us!”

It had to be Crocodile.

The crew of course quickly prepared themselves to fight back. Usopp honestly believed that this was where he was going to die. He didn’t feel prepared *at all* to go against a Warlord.

All of them covered their eyes, while just barely peeking out to see what they could. Gaara pulled on his goggles as the storm overtook them. Suddenly, Hasami let out a pained groan and fell.

At the speed they were going, they slid and tumbled several feet.

Luffy stretched out his arms; grabbing his crewmembers and pulling them into a tight hug. Gaara’s sand wrapped around them as they crashed through thick rock pillars; rolling like an oversized bowling ball. Thrusting out his hand, several spikes shot out of the sand shield and forced them to a stop. Luffy’s body acted like enough of a barrier that they thankfully didn’t experience any whiplash.

Each of them were dazed, and Gaara slowly lowered the shield.

Where was Crocodile?

That question was answered as sand shot around them, and Crocodile was standing there. Gaara snarled and charged, sand enveloping his arm into a claw, and he swiped at Crocodile who disintegrated – huh? That...didn’t feel right. Gaara didn’t hit him.

Crocodile reformed, but he seemed...not as put together. “What was that?”

He glanced down at himself – and his head disintegrated as Gaara swiped at it.

Crocodile reformed within seconds following the attack, but now his hair didn’t exactly look slicked back. He snarled himself and he attacked an oncoming Gaara, only for his sand to break apart upon

contact and then reform once that contact stopped.

“I...I can’t hit him?” Gaara slowly questioned. Frustrated, he began rapidly striking at Crocodile, who quickly pulled away.

“Stop doing that!” Crocodile angrily demanded, looking flustered.

Gaara instead decided to just use his fists and *still* –

“I just want to get one hit in!” Gaara raged in frustration.

Crocodile attacked on his own, but his sand only disintegrated upon contact and reformed within seconds.

“I think it’s like how two magnets repel each other...” Usopp theorized.

Crocodile gave a fierce sweep of his arms, and sand billowed through the air – and Crocodile shot past Gaara, heading towards the rest of their group.

Gaara snarled and ran after him.

Several things happened at once:

Crocodile shot towards Vivi, and Luffy and the others ran to assist Luffy and protect Vivi.

Hands sprouted from everyone’s bodies, and twisted them around; pulling them off their feet and ramming them into each other. Luffy, meanwhile, didn’t have any hands sprouting from his person. He managed to reach Crocodile and punched him, *hard*.

Crocodile was shocked of course, that some unknown and young rookie already knew Haki. But that didn’t deter him. Crocodile pulled his arm back, and powering his strike with a bit of his own Haki; thrust his hook through Luffy’s gut; dehydrating Luffy as he charged and dodged *around* Vivi.

“LUFFY!” one of the others screamed.

More sand sprung up around them; and the others had no choice but to protect their faces. Their exposed skin felt as if hundreds of thousands of microscopic razor blades were tearing at them; and all of it was mixing with the sand that already surrounded them.

Vivi lashed out blindly, trying to do *something, anything*. Sand tore

through the air, and Vivi cried out in pain as she was cut. But she refused to stop. Vivi had a bleeding cut above her eye, blinding her even more. But she kept going.

She heard yelling and charged towards it.

Crocodile ignored Vivi, and used his free hand to grab the three-eyed girl, who was struggling against the hands holding her in place.

Vivi peeked, squinting just enough to see – there was Crocodile! Vivi managed to tackle him.

Vivi reached up – her fingers were somewhat bloody – and she scratched at Crocodile's face.

He snarled, and twisted, slamming Vivi to the ground. She wheezed as the wind was knocked out of her. She quickly covered her mouth, gasping for air.

“Hurry up!” Miss All Sunday called out, sounding pained.

Zoro had managed to twist out of the hands, and ran towards Crocodile. He ghosted, and appeared behind Crocodile. He wasn't a Swordsman, so he didn't deserve the same level of respect. Zoro was ready to cut, when Crocodile held up a dehydrated Luffy as a shield.

Zoro didn't have much choice; he couldn't risk cutting Luffy. He shifted around, to the other side, ready to strike again.

“Pudding!” Sanji yelled as he thrashed against the hands.

“Sanji!”

Crocodile thrust his hook downwards in a violent swipe that met Zoro's blade. *“Tazón de Polvo!”*

The hands holding onto them disappeared.

The storm shoved at them bodily; tearing at them even more brutally than before.

The storm raged for several minutes; and then it finally stopped. They were all spread out several feet from each other.

Crocodile, Miss All Sunday, Pudding, Luffy, and Gaara – were gone.

“We have to get Pudding! We need to get her back!” Sanji was near hysterics.

“Stop! Do you seriously think that gallivanting through the desert is a good idea?!” Zoro demanded. “We have no idea where he took her!”

Sanji rounded on Zoro, near-yelling. “How can you be so cold-hearted?!”

“I’m not being cold-hearted, I’m being realistic!” Zoro shot back.

The two of them had their foreheads pressed together as they glared and practically snarled at each other in their argument.

“Will the two of you back down?! This isn’t helping anyone!” Nami got in between Zoro and Sanji before a serious fight could break out. That wasn’t what any of them needed right now. “Look, Pudding is *smart*, okay? She won’t let herself get killed so easily.”

Nami was saying that to reassure herself as much as she was trying to reassure the others. Because Crocodile was unpredictable. He was a man who was willing to destroy an *entire* country for his own gain. What would he be willing to do to just *one* person to get what he wanted? Nami refused to let her thoughts go there.

Pudding had her annoying moments, definitely. Always going on about them competing or some nonsense like that. But Pudding always made her favorite desserts and always came to her with new recipes designed just for her; always made sure Nami’s workspace had everything it needed so Nami wouldn’t have to; listened to Nami complain about the guys when they annoyed her...

She’d be fine. Had to be.

“Pudding’s also good at fighting,” Naruto spoke up. “She’s *really* good at fighting. And I’ve seen her escape those knots she likes doing, ‘ttebayou.”

Usopp looked hopeful and worried. “That means she *can* escape, right?”

Zoro sighed, not looking happy as he answered, “That’s only if she has the chance. Croc took her for a reason, so that means he’s likely going to have a guard on her.” His scowl deepened as he added, “At all times, if he’s smart.”

“Let’s wait.” Vivi suggested. Even though they were pressed for time, and maybe they’d be pushing it a little. But they could wait. It was better that she suggest it, and not someone else. Vivi didn’t want them feeling guilty about waiting for the others; not when she was counting so much on them. She forced optimism into her tone. “I mean, they’re bound to come back with her, right?”

“Yeah, they will!” Usopp agreed far too optimistically.

Sanji took in a shaky breath. “Yeah, okay. They’ll come back with her.”

Why had Crocodile’s target shifted from her to Pudding? Vivi had no idea, and she racked her brain trying to think of what Pudding could do that Vivi couldn’t.

Soon enough, Luffy and Gaara would return with a probably shaken up Pudding – or maybe she’d be thrilled at having been kidnapped. Have some strange, morbid fantasy about the experience. They’d all act annoyed and yet be so relieved, and everything would be fine.

It had to be.

When Luffy and Gaara finally came back, Pudding wasn’t with them.

Sanji was on his feet first. “Where is she?!”

Luffy looked distraught and Gaara looked irritated.

“How could you *not* get Pudding back from that shitty bastard?!”

“He...he took her.” Luffy said far too quietly. “That hand-lady was there to help Croc, and Gaara didn’t show up until... I couldn’t...I’m sorry.”

“I couldn’t do anything.” Gaara said quietly, not looking at the others. He sounded his age and looked guilty. He tugged at his scarf, pulling it up a bit to cover his face. “I should have been faster.”

“Are you *sure* we can’t go after them?” Vivi asked, for the sake of the others.

Her guilt and sadness swept over Luffy.

“But we’re short on time, aren’t we?” Usopp asked. He quickly waved his hands at Sanji’s feral glare. “H-hey! I-I’m *not* saying we *shouldn’t* go after her! I mean...*can* we?”

“We can split up, then!” Sanji suggested desperately. “Some of us can look for Pudding, while the rest go and stop the revolt.”

“But...” Chopper finally spoke up. “We’re limited on water and resources, remember – and – regular compasses don’t work around here – I mean...” Chopper looked teary-eyed as he added, “Looking for Pudding isn’t just unsafe, it’s unrealistic...”

Chopper pushed forward, even though Sanji’s glare was directed towards him. “You could end up getting *even more* lost, dehydrated in the middle of the dessert! You could *die* and we would have *no idea* where to even look!”

“Let’s just double-back and try!” Sanji angrily snapped, but the pleading was evident in his voice.

“They’re gone, though...” Luffy said sadly. “My Mystery Power isn’t picking any up any of them.”

“You can’t seriously be suggesting that we abandon her!”

“I’m not--!” Luffy tried to say, but Sanji grabbed his collar and yanked him forward.

“Luffy, you--!”

“Cut it out *now*.” Zoro said firmly, gripping Sanji’s wrist. “Let him go. This isn’t your decision.”

Sanji’s expression shifted from anger to something else before he let go and collapsed to his knees. In a quiet, choked voice he said, “...I promised her I’d never leave her behind.”

Zoro’s scowl lessened considerably. He thought of that time several years ago – when Naruto was almost taken from him – and the panic that he felt at just *almost*.

This was probably the most touchy-feely he would *ever* get with Sanji. His hand shifted to Sanji’s shoulder, giving it a light squeeze. “I’m *not* suggesting we leave her behind.”

He then pulled away. Zoro wasn’t good at giving comfort like that without feeling awkward. Sighing and scratching his head, Zoro added, “Look, Pudding was taken for a reason. That means she’s valuable *alive* – and we know where he’s heading. We just...have to find him in Alubarna before he gets what he wants from Pudding.”

Zoro looked at Luffy who looked a bit as if he had been crying. But maybe it was because he'd gotten sand in his eyes. That's what it was, definitely. "Luffy, it's your decision." He then added, probably unnecessarily, "As Captain."

"I..." Luffy's voice trailed off as he looked at his crew. They were all waiting for him to make a decision. Shanks and Touma both had told him of times they had to leave people behind. Luffy had sworn up and down he would *never* do that. Leaving behind your *nakama* was equivalent to abandoning them no matter the circumstances.

"Sometimes, you don't really get a choice," Shanks had told him. "It's the hardest decision you have to make as a Captain."

Shanks told him of a time that they had no choice – of the precious nakama he'd been forced to leave behind – him protesting and begging – and Shanks having to be physically dragged away by those fleeing.

"Your nakama and the moments you spend with them become all the more precious," Shanks was uncharacteristically despondent as he looked at the contents of his glass. "You don't want to experience that loss ever again, so you get stronger."

When he'd imagined himself in those scenarios Shanks and his crew had told him about, Luffy thought about all the ways he could have done something differently so everyone came back safe. This always involved kicking the ass of whoever was attacking them with not much variation. But they said it was desperate circumstances with little to no options of all them escaping alive.

One or two people had to be left behind. But in almost all those circumstances, those people volunteered. Sometimes, they'd had to tell people to stay behind – because they could give the others the chance to escape. Sometimes they'd had no choice – it was far too risky to risk the lives of many for the sake of one.

This was never something Luffy had actively considered happening in his Pirating career – the idea of it had been lingering in the back of his mind, certainly. Except – he'd never thought it would happen to him. If it did, he could just kick the other guy's ass and he and his *nakama* would party, and all would be right with the world.

He just – he didn't think he'd be making such a decision so soon into it.

Luffy didn't want to be making decision like this.

He thought of Pudding – being sucked into the sand just as he reached her. He looked at Vivi, who was right in front of him, he could feel her desperation and worry, and overflowing guilt. Sanji's emotions were a mix of rage, worry, fear, guilt, and sadness.

Everyone was scared and worried, and it enveloped him like a suffocating blanket.

As Captain, it was his job to alleviate those worries, right?

But – he...

His voice shook as he clenched his fists tightly, and quietly admitted, "I-I don't know what I'm supposed to *do*."

"Luffy, whatever decision you make, we'll stick by it no matter what." Nami said. She could see how difficult this was for him. Luffy being so distraught and hesitant with this, made her glad that she had chosen such a man to follow after, and appreciated him even more. Someone who genuinely cared about his crew and didn't want to leave one of their own behind. "We won't think less of you."

Sanji shakily lit a cigarette; took a deep breath, and let it out. The nicotine calmed him, somewhat. "Listen, Luffy. I promised to follow you, and...we'll get her back. You clearly won't let any of us go so easily without a fight, so..."

Luffy nodded, even though that was obviously not what he wanted to do. "Okay...let's...let's keep going. I'll kick Croc's ass, save Vivi's country, and we'll get Pudding back."

They were on the move again within seconds. Luffy turned back the direction they had come in, cupping his hands around his mouth and yelled as loud as he could, "***PUDDING! I'LL KICK CROC'S ASS AND WE'LL GET YOU BACK, YOU HEAR ME?!! NO MATTER WHAT!!***"

His shout was carried away with the wind.

As they continued on their journey, despondent, Luffy hugged his knees as he glared out at the passing scenery. It looked as empty as he felt right then.

Luffy felt a fierce determination rise in his gut. They *were* going to get Pudding back – and if something happened to her – if Croc did *anything* to her, Luffy would...he couldn't think like that. He gripped his hat and promised himself that from now on, no matter what...he

was *never* going to leave *any* of his *nakama* behind *ever* again. He would never make that choice if he could help it. He would chase them down to the ends of the Grand Line and back if he had to, and damn *anyone* no matter who they were – who got in the way of rescuing his beloved *nakama*.

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Pudding took in grateful gasps of air as she was pulled from the sand. Several hands wrapped around her, making it difficult to escape. Ropes bound her hands together firmly behind her back. If Pudding wiggled a bit and managed to get her hands on one of her knives or a kunai, she could get free. There was just the little matter of her having that window of a chance.

But then she'd have the desert to contend with.

She finally was able to really take in Crocodile's appearance. He hadn't really changed that much since she saw him last time. His hair was longer and he was actively slicking it back now that they were away from Luffy-sweetie and her crew. He'd also bulked up. Or maybe the coat gave him that appearance.

Pudding wasn't sure if Crocodile even recognized her. She'd been a tiny thing living in Mama's house back then. She'd always covered her forehead when guests were over, since her third eye was supposed to be a tightly-kept family secret.

Crocodile eyed Pudding, making her only slightly nervous. She had to have a plan...somehow.

"Oh, I'm entirely helpless," Pudding said with a sigh, "All tied up. You could have your way with me and I couldn't do anything about it. I bet your sand is so coarse...Just imagine those bits of sand exploring the most intimate of places and being left behind."

"Shut up." Crocodile said, and his hook was large enough to fit behind her neck as he lifted her up. Pudding struggled to no avail. She stopped when the tips of her toes brushed barely against the sand – and – if she wasn't careful, she'd probably rip her own throat out trying to escape. Or maybe impel herself on his hook through her skull.

What would Sanji and the crew do then? They were worried, right? There was a lingering fear that they'd leave her behind. They wouldn't do that, right? She reminded herself that Sanji had promised to never

leave her and that Luffy had essentially begged her to come with him.

It calmed her down, a little. Maybe it was a good thing her hands were bound. She had a habit of twisting a lock of her hair practically into knots when she was nervous.

Crocodile used his other hand to push her bangs back to reveal her eye.

His eyes widened before they shifted into something else. His eyes glittered with anticipation and greed.

That was exactly how Mama looked at her, before...

“W-what do you want?” Pudding asked uneasily, fighting to keep a smile on her face. Though she probably wasn’t doing a very good job. People looking at her like *that* was never a good sign.

“You’re my backup. You’re going to read a Poneglyph.”

Pudding’s eyes widened. Oh, no. Crap. *Shit*. This was *bad*.

Next to her, Miss All Sunday was frowning.

“Oh, a Poneglyph, hmm?” Pudding was *extremely* worried now. She did her best to mask it, smiling anyway. Her fingers twitched, wanting to twist a lock of hair into knots. “Of course, anything for you, sweetie.”

She put a purr into her voice and half-lidded her eyes as seductively as she could; while smiling. Crocodile was unmoved. That made things a bit more difficult. She counted on men getting flustered to exploit weaknesses.

Perhaps she wasn’t his type; or maybe he had too much self-control to fall for any wiles she used. Hell, there was a chance he wasn’t even attracted to women either because that simply wasn’t his thing – or maybe he liked men.

He set her down quite unceremoniously. Pudding stood, wishing she could brush herself off. But a little sand on her clothes wasn’t so bad.

“Oh, you like doing it rough, hm?” Pudding asked teasingly. “We’d have to progress our relationship a bit further before we get to that point, don’t you agree?”

Crocodile narrowed his eyes at her before scoffing. “Let’s go. Keep an

eye on her.”

Miss All Sunday gripped Pudding’s arm with what felt like unnecessary tightness and forced her to move forward. This was really, *really* bad! If Crocodile realized that Pudding *couldn’t* read that ancient language, then he was definitely going to kill her *for sure*.

“Is there anyone you like, Sir Crocodile? I could give you relationship advice if you want. ” Pudding said in a chipper tone, while trying to think of what she could do if she couldn’t escape before the Poneglyph reading. “I do love gossip.”

“Be quiet.” Crocodile ordered – more like demanded. “Or I’ll have you gagged.”

Rude.

“Kinky.” Pudding’s filter (or lack thereof) let slip through.

Miss All Sunday giggled, though. From the way she was looking at Crocodile, she was clearly laughing at his expense. Crocodile looked *very* displeased.

Pudding stayed quiet as they walked back towards the flooded casino. She had to think, desperately. Wait. He’d called her ‘backup’. That meant...that meant he had to have someone who *could* read the Poneglyphs. So why did he need *her*? Oh. He probably didn’t trust the one who *could* read them. That had to be it.

He probably wanted to see if they would read the same thing. If she lied about what she read and the person told the truth, she’d be killed; or they *both* lied and told two different stories, they both would be killed.

Pudding would have to charm and bullshit her way through this if she wanted to survive.

Hopefully.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone: I can’t wait to see Gaara and Croc fight!

Gaara and Croc: repel each other instead

End Notes

I'm also crossposting this on Fanfiction.net, and will gradually be adding things here. Thank you for reading!

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